

AND QUIET FLOWS THE DON

"The best new works of Soviet writers such as Sholokhov are linked with the great realistic tradition of the last century, which embodied the essence of Russian art, and which was made immortal by the master of Leo Tolstoy."

—Romain Rolland

"In its language, depth of feeling, humanity and plasticity *And Quiet Flows the Don* is a work that is thoroughly Russian...."

—Alexei Tolstoy

And Quiet Flows the Don was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1965. It has been regarded as an epic and translated into 60 languages of the world. Its author, Mikhail Sholokhov, is a son of the valley of the river Don and a Cossack. He started writing this novel in 1926 and completed it in 1940. Presented here is an abridgement of the original four-volume edition.



AND QUIET

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Mikhail Sholokhov

FILOWS THIE IDON



ORIENT PAPERBACKS

And Quiet Flows the Don

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THE Melekhov farm was at the very end of the village. The gate of the cattle-yard opened northward towards the Don. A steep, fifty-foot slope between chalky, moss-grown banks, and there was the shore. A pearly drift of mussel-shells, a grey, broken edging of wave-kissed shingle, and then—the steel-blue, rippling surface of the Don, seething in the wind. To the east, beyond the willow-wattle fences of threshing-floors—the Hetman's highway, grizzled wormwood scrub, the hardy greyish-brown, hoof-trodden plantain, a cross standing at the fork of the road, and then the steppe, enveloped in a shifting haze. To the south, a chalky ridge of hills. To the west, the street, crossing the square and running towards the leas.

The Cossack Prokofy Melekhov returned to the village during the last war but one with Turkey. He brought back a wife—a little woman wrapped from head to foot in a shawl. She kept her face covered, and rarely revealed her wild, yearning eyes. The silken shawl bore the scent of strange, aromatic perfumes; its rainbow-hued patterns aroused the envy of the Cossack women. The captive Turkish woman kept aloof from Prokofy's relations, and before long old Melekhov gave his son his portion. All his life the old man refused to set foot inside his son's house; he never got over the disgrace.

Prokofy speedily made shift for himself; carpenters built him a house, he himself fenced in the cattle-yard, and in the early autumn he took his bowed foreign wife to her new home. He walked with her through

the village, behind the cart laden with their worldly goods. Everybody, from the oldest to the youngest, rushed into the street. The men laughed discreetly into their beards, the women passed vociferous remarks to one another, a swarm of unwashed Cossack children shouted catcalls after Prokofy. But, with overcoat unbuttoned, he walked slowly along, as though following a freshly-ploughed furrow, squeezing his wife's fragile wrist in his own enormous, black palm, and holding his head with its straw-white mat of curls high in defiance. Only the wens below his cheek-bones swelled and quivered, and the sweat stood out between his stony brows.

Thenceforth he was rarely seen in the village, and never even attended the Cossack gatherings. He lived a secluded life in his solitary house by the Don. Strange stories were told of him in the village. The boys who pastured the calves beyond the meadow-road declared that of an evening, as the light was dying, they had seen Prokofy carrying his wife in his arms right as far as the Tatar burial mound. He would set her down, with her back to an ancient, weather-beaten, porous rock, on the crest of the mound, sit down at her side, and they would gaze fixedly across the steppe. They would gaze until the sunset had faded, and then Prokofy would wrap his wife in his sheep-skin and carry her back home. The village was lost in conjecture, seeking an explanation for such astonishing behaviour. The women gossiped so much that they had not even time to search each other's heads for lice. Rumour was rife about Prokofy's wife also; some declared that she was of entrancing beauty; others maintained the contrary. The matter was settled when one of the most venturesome of the women, the soldier's wife Mavra, ran along to Prokofy's house on the pretext of getting some leaven; Prokofy went down into the cellar for the leaven, and Mavra had time to discover that Prokofy's Turkish conquest was a perfect fright.

A few minutes later Mavra, her face flushed and her kerchief awry, was entertaining a crowd of women in a by-lane:

"And what could he have seen in her, my dears? If she'd only been a woman now, but a creature like her! Our girls are far better covered! Why, you could pull her apart like a wasp. And those great big black eyes, she flashes them like Satan, God forgive me."

The whisper went round the village that Prokofy's wife was a witch. Astakhov's daughter-in-law (the Astakhovs were Prokofy's nearest neighbours) swore that on the second day of Trinity, before dawn, she had seen Prokofy's wife, barefoot, her hair uncovered, milking the Astakhovs' cow. Since then its udder had withered to the size of a child's fist, the cow had lost its milk and died soon after.

That year there was an unusual dying-off of cattle. By the shallows of the Don fresh carcasses of cows and young bulls appeared on the sandy shore every day. Then the horses were affected. The droves grazing on the village pasture-lands melted away. And through the lanes and streets of the village crept an evil rumour.

The Cossacks held a meeting and went to Prokofy. He came out on the steps of his house and bowed.

"What can I do for you, worthy elders?"

Dumbly silent, the crowd drew nearer to the steps. One drunken old man was the first to cry:

"Drag your witch out here! We're going to try her..."

Prokofy flung himself back into the house, but they caught him in the passage. A burly Cossack, nicknamed Lushnya, knocked his head against the wall and told him:

"Don't make a row, there's no need for you to shout. We shan't touch you, but we're going to trample your wife into the ground. Better to destroy her than have all the village die for want of cattle. But don't you make a row, or I'll smash the wall in with your head!"

"Drag the bitch out into the yard!" came a roar from the steps. A regimental comrade of Prokofy's wound the Turkish woman's hair around one hand, clamped his other hand over her screaming mouth, dragged her at a run across the porch and flung her under the feet of the crowd. A thin shriek rose above

the howl of voices. Prokofy flung off half a dozen Cossacks, burst into the house, and snatched a sabre from the wall. Jostling against one another, the Cossacks rushed out of the house. Swinging the gleaming, whistling sabre around his head, Prokofy ran down the steps. The crowd drew back and scattered over the yard.

Lushnya was heavy on his feet, and by the threshing-floor Prokofy caught up with him; with a diagonal sweep down across the left shoulder from behind, he clave the Cossack's body to the belt. The crowd, who had been tearing stakes out of the fence, fell back, across the threshing-floor into the steppe.

Half an hour later the Cossacks ventured to approach Prokofy's farm again. Two of them stepped cautiously into the passage. On the kitchen threshold, in a pool of blood, her head flung back awkwardly, lay Prokofy's wife; her lips were writhing tormentedly, her gnawed tongue protruded. Prokofy, with shaking head and glassy stare, was wrapping a squealing little ball—the prematurely-born infant—in a sheepskin.

Prokofy's wife died the same evening. His old mother had compassion on the child and took charge of it. They plastered it with bran-mash, fed it with mare's milk, and, after a month, assured that the swarthy, Turkish-looking boy would survive, they carried him to church and christened him. They named him Pantelei after his grandfather. Prokofy came back from penal servitude twelve years later. With his clipped, ruddy beard streaked with grey and his Russian clothing, he did not look like a Cossack. He took his son and returned to his farm.

Pantelei grew up swarthy, and ungovernable. In face and figure he was like his mother. Prokofy married him to the daughter of a Cossack neighbour.

From then on Turkish blood began to mingle with that of the Cossack. And that was how the hook-nosed, savagely handsome Cossack family of Melekhovs, nicknamed "Turks," came into the village.

When his father died Pantelei took over the farm; he had the house rethatched, added an acre of common

land to the farmyard, built new sheds, and a barn with a sheet-iron roof. He ordered the tinsmith to cut a couple of weather-cocks out of the scrap iron, and when these were set up on the roof of the barn they brightened the Melekhov farmyard with their care-free air, giving it a self-satisfied and prosperous appearance.

Under the weight of the passing years Pantelei Prokofyevich grew gnarled and craggy; he broadened and acquired a stoop, but still looked a well-built old man. He was dry of bone, and lame. When angry, he completely lost control of himself and undoubtedly this had prematurely aged his buxom wife, whose face, once beautiful, was now a perfect spiderweb of furrows.

Pyotr, his elder, married son, took after his mother: stocky and snub-nosed, a luxuriant shock of corn-coloured hair, hazel eyes. But the younger, Grigory, was like his father: half a head taller than Pyotr, some six years younger, the same pendulous hawk nose as his father's, the whites of his burning eyes bluish in their slightly oblique slits, brown, ruddy skin drawn tight over angular cheek-bones. Grigory stooped slightly, just like his father; even in his smile there was a similar, rather savage quality.

Dunya—her father's favourite—a lanky large-eyed lass, and Pyotr's wife, Darya, with her small child, completed the Melekhov household.

"Look here, Grigory... I've noticed that you and Aksinya Astakhova..."

Grigory flushed violently, and turned away. His shirt collar cut into his muscular, sunburnt neck, pressing out a white band in the flesh.

"You watch out, young fellow," the old man continued, now roughly and angrily, "or I'll be having another kind of talk with you. Stepan's our neighbour, and I won't have any mucking about with his woman. That kind of thing can lead to mischief, and I warn you beforehand, if I see you at it I'll flay the hide off you!"

Pantelei clenched his gnarled fist, and with narrowed eyes watched the blood ebbing from his son's face.

"It's all lies!" Grigory muttered, and gazed straight

at the bluish bridge of his father's nose.

"You keep quiet."

"People like to talk—"

"Hold your tongue, you son of a bitch!"

They remained silent until, as they were approaching the shore, his father reminded him:

"Mind what I've said, or from now on I'll stop your going out at night. You won't stir a step outside the yard!"

Biting his lips, Grigory followed his father. "Try it, Dad! I'm going out tonight even if you hobble my feet!" he thought, his eyes boring fiercely into the back of the old man's head.

Thirty Cossacks were going from the village to the May training camp. Just before seven o'clock wagons with tarpaulin covers, Cossacks on foot and on horse-back, in homespun shirts and carrying their equipment, began to stream towards the square.

Pyotr was standing on the steps, hurriedly stitching a broken rein.

Grigory took the tall, rawboned Don horse with a white blaze on its forehead, led it out through the gate, and resting his left hand lightly on its withers, vaulted on to its back and went off at a swinging trot. He tried to rein the horse in at the descent to the river, but the animal stumbled, quickened its pace, and flew down the slope. Leaning back until he almost lay along the animal's spine, Grigory saw a woman with pails going down the hill. He turned sharply off the path and dashed into the water, leaving a cloud of dust behind him.

Aksinya came swinging down the slope. When still some distance away she shouted to him:

"You mad devil! You almost rode me down. You wait, I'll tell your father how you ride."

"Now, neighbour, don't get angry. When you've seen your husband off to camp maybe I'll be useful on your farm."

"How the devil could you be useful to me?"

"You'll be asking me when mowing time comes," Grigory laughed.

Aksinya dexterously drew a full pail of water from the river, and pressed her skirt between her knees away from the wind.

"Is your Stepan ready yet?" Grigory asked.

"What's that to do with you?"

"What a spitfire! Can't I ask?"

"He is, what of it?"

"So you'll be left a grass-widow?"

"Yes."

The horse raised its lips from the water, and stood gazing across the Don, its fore-feet treading the stream. Aksinya filled her second pail, hoisted the yoke across her shoulders, and with a swinging stride set off up the slope. Grigory turned the horse and followed her.

"You'll be missing your husband, won't you?"

Without halting Aksinya turned her head and smiled.

"Of course I shall. Get married yourself," she caught her breath and went on jerkily, "then you'll know whether you miss your darling or not."

Grigory brought the horse level with her and looked into her eyes.

"But other wives are glad when their husbands go. Our Darya will grow fat without her Pyotr."

Aksinya's nostrils quivered and she breathed hard.

"A husband's not a leech, but he sucks your blood all the same." She pushed her hair straight. "Shall we be seeing you married soon?"

"I don't know, it depends on Father. After my army service, I suppose."

"You're still young; don't get married."

"Why not?"

"It dries you up." She looked up from under her brows, and smiled cheerlessly without parting her lips. For the first time Grigory noticed that her lips were shamelessly greedy and rather swollen. Stranding the horse's mane with his fingers, he replied:

"I don't want to get married. Someone will love me without that."

"Have you noticed anyone, then?"

"What should I notice? Now you're seeing your Stepan off...?"

"Don't try to play about with me!"

"What will you do about it?"

"I'll tell Stepan."

"I'll show your Stepan. . ."

"You're so cocksure, mind you don't cry first."

"Don't try to scare me, Aksinya!"

"I'm not trying to scare you. You hang around with the girls, let them hem your hankies for you, but keep your eyes off me."

"I'll look at you all the more now."

"Well, look then."

Aksinya gave him a conciliatory smile and left the path, trying to pass the horse. Grigory turned the animal sideways and blocked the way.

"Let me pass, Grisha."

"I won't."

"Don't be a fool. I must see my husband."

Grigory smilingly teased the horse, and it edged Aksinya towards the bank.

"Let me pass, you devil! There are some people over there. If they see us what will they think?" she muttered.

She swept a frightened glance around and passed by, frowning and without a backward glance.

Over the wattle fence, Grigory saw Stepan getting ready. Aksinya, dressed up in a green woollen skirt, led out his horse. Stepan smilingly said something to her. Unhurriedly, possessively, he kissed his wife, and his arm lingered long around her shoulder. His hand, darkened by sun and toil, looked coal-black against her white blouse. He stood with his back to Grigory; his firm, clean-shaven neck, his broad, rather sloping shoulders, and (whenever he bent towards his wife) the twisted ends of his light-brown moustache were visible across the fence.

Aksinya laughed at something and shook her head. The big black stallion lurched slightly as Stepan swung his great weight into the saddle. Sitting as though planted in the saddle, Stepan rode his black horse at a brisk trot through the gate, and Aksinya walked at his side, holding the stirrup and looking up lovingly and hungrily, like a dog, into his eyes.

Grigory watched them to the turn of the road with a long unblinking gaze.

Aksinya was seventeen when she was given in marriage to Stepan Astakhov. She came from the village of Dubrovka, from the sands on the other side of the Don.

The day was frosty and the ice rang merrily on the roads when Aksinya was installed as young mistress of the Astakhov household. The morning after the festivities her mother-in-law, a tall old woman doubled up with some painful woman's disease, woke Aksinya, led her into the kitchen, and aimlessly shifting things about, said to her:

"Now, dear daughter, we didn't take you for making love, nor for you to lie abed. Go and milk the cows, and then get some food ready. I'm old and sick. You must take over the household, it will all fall on you."

The same day Stepan took his young wife into the barn and beat her deliberately and terribly. He beat her on the belly, the breasts and the back, taking care that the marks should not be visible to others. After that he neglected her, kept company with flighty grass-widows and went out almost every night, leaving Aksinya locked in the barn or the best room.

For eighteen months, until there was a child, he would not forgive her. Then he was quieter, but was grudging with caresses and rarely spent the night at home.

The large farm with its numerous cattle burdened Aksinya with work. Stepan worked half-heartedly, and went off to smoke, to play cards, to learn the latest news, and Aksinya had to do everything. Her mother-in-law was a poor help. After bustling around a little she would drop on to the bed, and with lips tight-drawn and eyes gazing agonizedly at the ceiling, would lie groaning, rolled into a bundle. At such times her face, which was dotted all over with great ugly moles, broke out in perspiration and tears slithered one by one down her cheeks. Throwing down her work, Aksinya would hide in a corner and stare at her mother-in-law's face in fear and pity.

The old woman died just before the child was born. In the morning Aksinya's labour pains began, and about noon, an hour or so before the child came into the world, the grandmother dropped dead by the stable door. The midwife ran out to warn the tipsy Stepan not to go into the bedroom, and saw the old woman lying with her legs tucked under her. After the birth of the child, Aksinya devoted herself to her husband, but she had no feeling for him, only a bitter womanly pity and force of habit remained. The child died within a year. The old life returned. And when Grisha Melekhov crossed Aksinya's path, she realized with terror that she was attracted to the gentle, swarthy young fellow. He waited on her with a persistent expectant love, and it was this persistence that Aksinya feared in him. She saw that he was not afraid of Stepan, she felt that he would not hold back because of him, and without consciously desiring it, resisting the feeling with all her might, she noticed that on Sundays and weekdays she was attiring herself more carefully. Making up excuses for her conscience, she tried to place herself more frequently in his path. It made her happy to feel Grigory's black eyes caressing her heavily and rapturously. When she awoke of a morning and went to milk the cows she would smile, and without realizing why, think to herself: "Today's a happy day. But why...? Oh, Grigory...Grisha." She was frightened by the new feeling which filled her, and in her thoughts she felt her way gropingly, cautiously, as though crossing the Don over the melting ice of March.

After seeing Stepan off to camp she decided to see Grigory as little as possible.

The haymaking began immediately after Trinity. From early morning the meadow blossomed with women's holiday skirts, the bright embroidery of aprons, and coloured kerchiefs. The whole village turned out for the mowing. The mowers and rakers attired themselves as though for an annual holiday. So it had been from of old.

The Melekhovs were late in starting. They set out

when nearly half the village were already in the meadow.

Dusk had fallen when they stopped for the day. Aksinya raked the last rows together, and went to the cart to cook some millet mash. All day she had maliciously made fun of Grigory, gazing at him with eyes full of hatred, as though in revenge for some great, unforgettable injury. Grigory, gloomy and faded somehow, drove the bullocks down to the Don for water. His father had watched him and Aksinya all day. Eyeing Grigory unpleasantly he said:

"Have your supper, and then guard the bullocks. See that they don't get into the grass! Take my sheepskin."

Darya laid her child under the cart and went into the forest with Dunya for brushwood.

Over the meadow the waning moon mounted the dark, inaccessible heaven. A snowstorm of moths whirled around the flames. Near the fire supper was laid on a piece of coarse cloth. The millet boiled in the smoky field-pot. Wiping a spoon with the edge of her underskirt, Darya called to Grigory:

"Come and have your supper."

His father's sheepskin draped over his shoulders, Grigory emerged from the darkness and approached the fire.

"What's made you so moody?" Darya smiled.

"Got the back-ache. Must be going to rain," he countered lightly.

"He doesn't want to watch the bullocks," Dunya laughed, and, sitting down by her brother, she tried to start a conversation. But somehow her efforts were unsuccessful. Pantelei supped his porridge, crunching the under-cooked millet with his teeth. Aksinya ate without lifting her eyes, smiling half-heartedly at Darya's jokes. A troubled flush burned in her cheeks.

Grigory got up first and went off to the bullocks.

"Take care the bullocks don't trample somebody else's grass," his father shouted after him, then a crumb of millet stuck in his throat and for a long time he coughed raspily. Dunya's cheeks swelled as she tried to suppress her laughter.

The fire burned low. The smouldering brushwood wrapped the little group in the honey scent of burning leaves.

At midnight Grigory stole up to the camp, and halted some ten paces away. His father was snoring tunelessly on the cart. The unquenched embers stared out from the ash with golden peacock's eyes.

A grey, shrouded figure broke away from the cart and came slowly towards Grigory. Two or three paces away, it halted. Aksinya! Grigory's heart thumped fast and heavily; he stepped forward crouchingly, flinging back the edge of his sheepskin, and pressed her compliant, burning body to his own. Her legs bowed at the knees; she trembled, her teeth chattering. Grigory suddenly flung her over his arm as a wolf throws a slaughtered sheep across its back, and, stumbling over the trailing edges of his open coat, and panting hard, made off.

"Oh, Grisha, Grisha! Your father..."

"Quiet!"

Tearing herself away, gasping for breath in the sour sheep's wool, choking with the bitterness of regret, Aksinya cried in a low moaning voice that was almost a shout:

"Let go, what does it matter now...? I'll go of my own accord."

Not azure and poppy-red, but rabid as the wayside henbane is a woman's belated love.

After the mowing Aksinya was a changed woman: as though someone had set a mark on her face, branded her. When other women met her they smiled slyly, and nodded their heads after her. The girls were envious, but she held her happy, shameful head proud and high.

Soon everybody knew of her affair with Grigory Melekhov. At first it was talked about in whispers only half-believed—but after the village shepherd had seen them in the early dawn by the windmill, lying under the moon in the young rye, the rumour spread like a wave breaking turbidly on the shore.

It reached Pantelei's ears also. He made straight for home. He walked with his head lowered like a bull, his fingers knotted in his fist, hobbling more noticeably on his lame leg. As he passed the Astakhovs' house he glanced over the wattle fence: Aksinya, looking young and smart, with a lithe swing in her hips, was going into the house with an empty bucket.

"Hey, wait!" he called, and stumped in at the gate. Aksinya halted and waited for him. They went into the house. The cleanly-swept earthen floor was sprinkled with red sand; on the bench in the corner were pasties fresh from the oven. A smell of musty clothes and sweet apples came from the best room.

A tabby cat with a huge head purred round Pantelei's legs. It arched its back and pressed itself against his boots. With a fierce kick he sent it flying against the bench.

"What's all this I hear? Eh?" he shouted looking Aksinya straight in the eyes. "Your husband hardly out of sight, and you already setting your cap at other men! I'll make Grisha's blood flow for this, and I'll write to your Stepan! Let him hear of it! You whore, haven't you been beaten enough! Don't set your foot inside my yard from this day on. Carrying on with a young man, and when Stepan comes, I'll have to. . ."

Aksinya listened with narrowed eyes. And suddenly she shamelessly swung the hem of her skirt, enveloped Pantelei in the smell of woman's clothes, and came breasting at him with writhing lips and bared teeth.

"What are you, my father-in-law? Eh? Who are you to teach me? Go and teach your own fat-bottomed woman! Keep order in your own yard! You limping, stump-footed devil! Clear out of here, you won't frighten me!"

"Wait, you daft hussy!"

"There's nothing to wait for! Get back where you came from! And if I want your Grisha, I'll eat him, bones and all, and answer for it myself! Chew that over! What if I love Grisha? Beat me, will you? Write to my husband? Write to the ataman if you like, but Grisha belongs to me! He's mine! Mine! I have

him and I shall keep him!"

Aksinya pressed against the quailing Pantelei with her breast, seared him with the flame of her black eyes, overwhelmed him with more and more terrible and shameless words. His eyebrows quivering, the old man backed to the door, groped for the stick he had left in the corner, and waving his hand, pushed open the door with his bottom. Aksinya pressed him out of the passage, pantingly, frenziedly shouting:

"I'll have my love, I'll make up for all the wrongs I've suffered! And then kill me if you like! He's my Grisha! Mine!"

Muttering something into his beard, Pantelei limped off to his house.

He found Grigory in the room. Without saying a word, he brought his stick down over his son's back. Doubling up, Grigory hung on his father's arm.

"What's that for, Father?"

"For your goings-on, you son of a bitch!"

"What goings-on?"

"Don't wrong your neighbour! Don't shame your father! Don't run after women, you young buck!" Pantelei snorted, dragging Grigory, who had grabbed the stick, around the room trying to wrest it from him.

"I'm not going to let you beat me!" Grigory cried hoarsely, and setting his teeth, he tore the stick out of his father's hand. Across his knee it went, and snap!

Pantelei Prokofyevich struck him on the neck with his hard fist.

"I'll whip you in public. You accursed son of the devil! I'll marry you to the village idiot! I'll geld you!" his father roared.

The noise brought the old mother running into the room.

"Pantelei, Pantelei! Cool down a little! Wait!"

But the old man had lost his temper in real earnest. He sent his wife flying, overturned the table with the sewing-machine on it, and victoriously flew out into the yard. Grigory, whose shirt had been torn in the struggle, had not had time to take it off when the door

banged open again, and his father appeared once more like a storm-cloud on the threshold.

"I'll marry him off, the son of a bitch!" He stamped his foot like a horse and fixed his gaze on Grigory's muscular back. "I'll drive off tomorrow and arrange the match. To think that I should live to see people laugh in my face about my son."

"Let me get my shirt on first, then you can marry me off."

"I'll marry you to the village idiot!" The door slammed, and the old man clattered away down the steps.

A heavy rattle of wheels and snorting of horses in the street. Aksinya set down the pail and went to look out of the front window. Holding his sabre pommel, Stepan was coming through the wicket-gate. The other Cossacks were galloping away towards the village square. Aksinya crumpled her apron in her fingers and sat down on the bench. Steps in the porch... Steps in the passage... Steps at the very door...

Stepan stood on the threshold, gaunt and estranged.

"Well?"

Aksinya, all her full, buxom body reeling, went to meet him.

"Beat me," she said slowly, and turned sideways towards him.

"Well, Aksinya?"

"I shan't hide. I have sinned. Beat me, Stepan!"

Her head drawn into her shoulders, crouching down and protecting only her belly with her arms, she faced him. Her eyes stared unblinkingly from their dark sockets, out of her dumb, fear-distorted face. Stepan swayed and walked past her. His unwashed shirt smelled of male sweat and bitter roadside scents. He dropped on to the bed without removing his cap. He lay for a moment, then jerked his shoulders, and threw off his sword-belt. His blond usually crisp moustache drooped limply. Not turning her head, Aksinya glanced sidelong at him. Now and then she shuddered. Stepan put his feet on the foot of the bed. The mud slowly

oozed from his boots. He stared at the ceiling and toyed with the leather tassel of his sword.

"Breakfast ready?"

"No..."

"Get me something to eat."

He sipped some milk, wetting his moustache. He chewed slowly at the bread. Aksinya stood by the stove. In burning terror she watched her husband's little gristly ears rising and falling as he ate.

Stepan rose from the table and crossed himself.

"Come on, m'dear, tell me about it," he curtly demanded.

With bowed head Aksinya cleared the table. She was silent.

"Tell me how you waited for your husband, how you guarded his honour. Well?"

A terrible blow on the head tore the ground from under Aksinya's feet and flung her towards the door. Her back struck against the door-post, and she groaned dully.

Women are weak and soft in the body, but Stepan could send lusty and sturdy guardsmen flying with a well-aimed blow on the head. It may have been fear that lifted Aksinya, or perhaps it was a woman's will to live—she came to her senses, lay a moment, resting, then scrambled on to all fours.

Stepan was lighting a cigarette in the middle of the room and did not see her rising to her feet. He threw his tobacco pouch on the table, but Aksinya had already slammed the door behind her. He chased after her.

Her head streaming with blood, Aksinya ran towards the fence separating their yard from the Melekhovs'. Stepan overtook her at the fence. His black hand fell like a hawk on her head. His fingers wound into her hair. He tore at it and threw her to the ground, into the cinders that Aksinya dumped by the fence every day.

What if a husband does trample his wife with his boots, his hands behind his back? One-armed Alexei Shamil walked past the gate, looked in, blinked and

parted his bushy little beard with a smile; after all it was quite understandable why Stepan should be punishing his lawfully-wedded wife. Shamil was tempted to stop to see whether he would beat her to death or not, but his conscience would not allow him. After all, he wasn't a woman.

Watching Stepan from afar, you would have thought he was doing the Cossack dance. And so Grigory thought, as through the window he saw Stepan jumping up and down. But he looked again, and flew out of the house. Pressing his heavy fists against his chest, he ran on his toes to the fence. Pyotr pounded after him.

Over the high fence Grigory flew like a bird. He charged Stepan from behind at full speed. Stepan staggered and turning round came at Grigory like a bear.

The Melekhov brothers fought desperately. They packed at Stepan like carrion-crows at a carcass. Grigory went down several times under Stepan's rock-like fist. He was not quite a match for a hardened brawler like Stepan, but the stocky agile Pyotr, although he bent under the blows like a reed before the wind, stood firmly on his feet.

Stepan, one eye flashing (the other was turning the colour of an underripe plum) retreated to the steps.

Christonya happened to come along to borrow some harness from Pyotr, and he separated them.

"Stop that!" He waved his arms. "Break away, or I'll report it to the ataman."

Pyotr carefully spat blood and half a tooth into his palm, and said hoarsely:

"Come on, Grigory. We'll get him some other time."

"Mind I don't get you!" Stepan threatened from the steps.

"All right, all right!"

"And no 'all right' about it, I'll tear your guts out."

"Is that serious or joking?"

Stepan came swiftly down the steps. Grigory broke

forward to meet him, but pushing him towards the gate, Christonya promised:

"Only dare, and I'll give you a good hiding."

From that day onward the hatred between the Melekhovs and Stepan Astakhov drew itself into a tight knot. Grigory Melekhov was fated to untie that knot two years later in East Prussia, near the town of Stolypin.

"Good health to you!"

"Praise be!" the master of the house, a stocky, freckled old man replied, rising from the bench.

"Some guests for you, Miron Grigoryevich," Pantelei continued.

"Guests are always welcome. Marya, give the visitors something to sit on."

His elderly, flat-chested wife wiped non-existent dust from three stools, and pushed them towards the guests. Pantelei sat down on the very edge of one, and mopped his perspiring brow with his handkerchief.

"We've come on business," he began without beating about the bush. At this point Ilyinichna and Vasilisa, pulling up their skirts, also sat down.

"By all means. On what business?" the master smiled.

Grigory entered, stared around him and greeted the Korshunovs. A deep russet spread across Miron's freckled face. Only now did he guess the object of the visit. "Have the horses been brought into the yard? Get some hay put down for them," he ordered his wife.

"We've just a little matter to talk over," Pantelei went on, twisting his curly beard and tugging at his ear-ring in his agitation. "You have a girl unmarried, we have a son. Couldn't we come to some arrangement? We'd like to know. Will you give her away now, or not? Mebbe we might become relations?"

"Who knows?" Miron scratched his bald spot. "I must say, we weren't thinking of giving her in marriage this autumn. We've our hands full with work here, and she's not so very old. She's only just past her

eighteenth spring. That's right, isn't it, Marya?"

"We had proposals for our girl way back in early spring. Our girl won't be left on the shelf. We can't grumble to the good God... She can do everything, in the field or at home..." Korshunov's wife replied.

"If a good man were to come along, you wouldn't say no," Pantelei broke into the women's chatter.

"It isn't a question of saying no," the master scratched his head. "We can give her away at any time."

"Sooner or later, we have to part with her," the mistress sobbed, half-hypocritically, half in earnest.

"Call your daughter, Miron Grigoryevich, and let's look at her."

"Natalya!"

A girl appeared timidly at the door, her dark fingers fidgeting with the frill of her apron.

"Come in! Come in! She's shy," the mother encouraged her, smiling through her tears.

Grigory looked at her.

Bold grey eyes under a black lace scarf. A small, rosy dimple in the supple cheek. Grigory turned his eyes to her hands: they were large and marred with hard work. Under the short green jacket embracing the strong body, the small, maidenly firm breasts rose outwards naively and pitifully, and their sharp little nipples showed like buttons.

In a moment Grigory's eyes had taken her all in, from the head to the long, beautiful legs. He looked her over as a horse-dealer surveys a mare before purchase, and thought: "She'll do," then let his eyes meet hers. The simple, sincere, slightly embarrassed gaze seemed to be saying: "Here am I all, as I am. Judge of me as you wish." "Splendid!" Grigory replied with his eyes and smile.

"Well, that's all." Her father waved her out.

As she closed the door behind her, Natalya looked at Grigory without attempting to conceal her smile and her curiosity.

Only after he learned of Aksinya's conduct did Stepan, nursing his pain and hatred in his soul, realize that despite his poor sort of life with her he loved her with a dreary, hateful love. He had lain in the wagon at night, covered with his greatcoat, his arms locked behind his head, and thought of how his wife would greet him on his return home. It was as if he had a scorpion in his breast in place of a heart. As he lay thinking over a thousand details of his revenge his teeth felt as if they were clogged with heavy grains of sand. The fight with Pyotr had spilled his anger. When he arrived home he had been tired out and Aksinya had got off lightly.

From the day of his homecoming an unseen spectre dwelt in the Astakhovs' house. Aksinya went about on tiptoe and spoke in whispers, but in her eyes, sprinkled with the ash of fear, lurked a small spark, left from the flame Grigory had kindled.

As he watched her, Stepan felt rather than saw this. He tormented himself. At night, when the drove of flies had fallen asleep on the cross-beam, and Aksinya, her lips trembling, had made the bed, he pressed his horny palm over her mouth and beat her. He demanded shameless details of her relations with Grigory. Aksinya tossed about and gasped for breath on the hard bed smelling of sheepskin. Tired of torturing her dough-soft body, he passed his hand over her face, seeking for tears. But her cheeks were burningly dry, and only her jaws worked under his fingers.

"Will you tell?"

"No!"

"I'll kill you!"

"Kill me, kill me, for the love of Christ! This isn't life..."

Grinding his teeth, Stepan twisted the fine skin, all damp with sweat, on her breast. Aksinya shuddered and groaned.

"Does it hurt?" Stepan said jocularly.

"Yes, it hurts."

"Do you think it didn't hurt me?"

It would be late before he fell asleep. In his sleep

he clenched his fists. Rising on her elbow, Aksinya would gaze at her husband's face, handsome and changed in slumber, then let her head fall back on the pillow, and whisper to herself.

She hardly saw Grigory now. Once she happened to meet him down by the Don. Grigory had been watering the bullocks and was coming up the slope, waving a switch and staring at his feet. Aksinya was going down to the Don. She saw him, and felt the yoke of the buckets turn cold in her hands and the hot blood beat at her temples.

Afterwards, when she recalled the meeting, she found it difficult to convince herself that it had really happened. Grigory noticed her when she had all but passed him. At the insistent creaking of the buckets he raised his head, his eyebrows quivered and he smiled stupidly. Aksinya gazed straight over his head at the green waves of the Don, and beyond at the ridge of the sandy headland. A burning flush wrung tears from her eyes.

"Aksinya!"

She walked on several paces and stood with her head bent as though before a blow. Angrily whipping a lagging bullock, he said without turning his head:

"When is Stepan going out to cut the rye?"

"He's getting ready now."

"See him off, then go to our sunflower patch and I'll come along after."

Her pails creaking, Aksinya went down to the Don. The foam snaked along the shore, a yellow flare of lace on the green hem of the wave. White sea-gulls were hovering and mewing above the river.

When Aksinya approached the steps Stepan, in a broad-brimmed straw hat, was harnessing the horses to the reaping machine. "Pour some water into the pitcher."

Aksinya poured a pail of water into the pitcher and burned her fingers on the hot iron rim.

"You ought to have some ice or the water will get warm soon," she said, looking at her husband's perspiring back.

"Go and borrow some from the Melekhovs. No, don't go." Stepan shouted, remembering.

Aksinya went to shut the wicket-gate. Stepan lowered his eyes and snatched up the knout.

"Where are you going?"

"To shut the gate."

"Come back, you bitch. I told you not to go."

She hurriedly returned to the steps and tried to hang her yoke on the rails, but her hands were trembling too much. The yoke clattered down the steps.

Stepan flung his tarpaulin coat over the front seat, and took up the reins.

"Open the gate."

As she did so, she ventured to ask: "When will you be back?"

"By evening. I've agreed to reap with Anikushka. Take the food along to him. He'll be coming out to the fields when he's finished at the smith's."

The wheels of the reaper squeaked as they carved into the grey plush of the dust. Aksinya went into the house and stood a moment with her hand pressed to her head, then, flinging a kerchief over her hair, ran down to the river.

"But suppose he comes back? What then?" the thought suddenly burned into her mind. She stopped as though she saw a deep pit at her feet, glanced back, and sped almost at a run along the river bank to the meadows.

"Aksinya!"

"This way."

"So you've come!" Rustling the leaves, Grigory approached and sat down at her side.

"What's that on your cheek?"

Aksinya smeared the fragrant golden dust with her sleeve.

"Must be from the sunflowers."

"There too, under your eye."

She brushed it off.

Their eyes met. And in reply to Grigory's mute inquiry, she broke into weeping.

"I can't stand it... I'm lost, Grisha."

"What does he do?"

Fiercely she tore open the collar of her blouse. The pink, girlishly swelling breasts were covered with cherry-blue bruises.

"Don't you know? He beats me every day. He's sucking my blood... And you're a fine one... Soiled me like a dog, and off you go... You're all..." She buttoned her blouse with trembling fingers, and, frightened that he might be offended, glanced at his averted face.

"So you're trying to put the blame on me?" he said slowly, biting a blade of grass.

"And aren't you to blame?" she cried fiercely.

"A dog doesn't worry an unwilling bitch."

Aksinya hid her face in her hands. The insult struck home like a hard, calculated blow.

"What's the matter? Have I offended you? Aksinya! Now, wait! Stop, I want to say something."

She tore her hands from her face. "I came here to get advice. What did you do it for? It's bitter enough as it is. And you..."

Grigory flushed with remorse. "Aksinya... I didn't mean to say that, don't take on."

"I haven't come to fasten myself on you. You needn't be afraid."

At that moment she really believed that she had not come to fasten herself on Grigory, but as she had run along by the Don she had vaguely thought: "I'll talk him round! He won't get married. Who else am I to live with?" Then she had remembered Stepan and had obstinately shaken her head to drive away the troublesome thought.

"So our love is over?" Grigory asked, and turned on to his stomach, resting on one elbow and spitting out the rosy petals of the bindweed flower he had been chewing.

"What do you mean—over?" Aksinya took alarm. "What do you mean?" she insisted, trying to look into his eyes. There was a gleam of bluish white as he turned them away.

Grigory sighed abruptly and lay on his back, pressing his shoulder-blades into the hot soil.

"Listen, Aksinya!" he began slowly. "This is rotten somehow... I've been thinking... What's done can't be undone. Why try to fix the blame? Somehow we've got to go on living."

Aksinya listened anxiously, breaking a stalk in her hand as she waited. She looked into Grigory's face and caught the dry and sober glitter of his eyes.

"I've been thinking, let us put an end to..."

Aksinya swayed. Her fingers clawed into the tough bindweed as she waited for the end of the sentence. A fire of terror and impatience avidly licked her face, her mouth went dry. She thought he was about to say, "put an end to Stepan," but impatiently he licked his dry lips (they were working fiercely) and said:

"...put an end to this affair. Eh?"

Aksinya stood up, and pressing through the swaying, yellow heads of the sunflowers, went towards the gate.

"Aksinya!" Grigory called chokingly.

The gate creaked heavily in reply.

Natalya fitted well into the Melekhov household. Although he was rich and employed labourers, her father had brought up his children to work. Hard-working Natalya won the hearts of her husband's parents. Ilyinichna, who secretly did not like her elder clothes-loving daughter-in-law Darya, took to Natalya from the very first.

"Sleep on, sleep on, little one! What are you out so early for?" she would protest kindly, bustling about the kitchen on her stout legs. "Go back to bed, we'll manage without you."

And Natalya who had got up at dawn to help in the kitchen would go back to the best room to complete her rest.

Grigory had begun to get used to his newly-married state; but after two or three weeks he realized with fear and chagrin that he had not completely broken with Aksinya. Something was left like a thorn in his heart, and the pain would not go soon. The feeling which,

in the excitement of marriage, he had dismissed with a careless wave of the hand was deep-rooted. He thought he could forget, but it refused to be forgotten, and the wound bled.

As he dutifully caressed his wife, trying to inflame her with his own youthful zest, he met with only coldness and an embarrassed submission from her. Natalya shrank from bodily delights; she had inherited something of her mother's slow, unresponsive blood, and as he recalled Aksinya's passionate fervour Grigory sighed: "Your father must have made you on ice, Natalya. You're too chilly by half."

And when he met Aksinya she would smile with a vague darkening of the pupils and her words clung like the mud at the bottom of a stream.

"Hullo, Grisha! How's love with your young wife?"

"All right," Grigory would reply evasively, and escape as quickly as possible from her caressing glance.

Stepan had evidently made up his quarrel with his wife. He visited the tavern less frequently, and one evening, as he was winnowing grain on the threshing-floor, he suggested, for the first time since the beginning of the trouble: "Let's sing a song, Aksinya!"

They sat down, their backs against a heap of threshed, dusty wheat. Stepan began an army song, Aksinya joined in with her full, throaty voice. They sang well together, as they had in the first years of their married life, when they used to jog back from the fields under the crimson hem of the sunset glow and Stepan would sit on the load and sing an old song, as long and sad as the wild and desolate road across the steppe. Aksinya with her head resting on the bulging hoops of her husband's chest would take up the tune. The horses would pull the creaking wagon and the shaft-bow would bob up and down. And from afar the old men of the village would listen to the song.

"She's got a fine voice, that wife of Stepan's."

"Aye, nice singing."

"And what a voice Stepan has got, clear as a bell."

And as they sat on the earthen banks round their

cottages watching the dusty purple of the sunset, the old men would exchange remarks across the street, about the song, where it came from, and about those who had loved it.

Grigory heard the Astakhovs singing, and while he was threshing he could see Aksinya as self-assured as before, and apparently happy. Or so it seemed to him.

That night as Grigory wrapped himself in his thick prickly sheepskin, he said wistfully to Natalya:

"You're a stranger, somehow! You're like that moon, you neither chill a man, nor warm him. I don't love you, Natalya; you mustn't be angry. I didn't want to say anything about it, but there it is; we can't go on like this. I'm sorry for you; it looked as if we were coming closer lately, but I can't feel anything in my heart. It's just empty. Like the steppe tonight."

Natalya stared up at the inaccessible starry pastures, at the shadowy, ghost-like cloak of the clouds floating above her, and was silent. From somewhere in the bluish-black wilderness above a belated flight of cranes called to each other with voices like little silver bells.

The withered grass had a sad, dead smell about it. On a hillock flickered the ruddy glow of a ploughman's camp-fire.

Grigory awoke just before dawn. A three-inch layer of snow covered his sheepskin. The steppe was hidden beneath the shimmering, virginal blue of the fresh fall; the clearly-marked tracks of a hare that had lost its way on the first snow ran close by the spot where he lay.

When Pantelei returned he went at once to the room which he and his wife occupied. Ilyinichna had been unwell for some days, and her puffy face reflected her weariness and pain. She lay propped up high on a plump feather bed with a pillow at her back. At the sound of Pantelei's footsteps she turned her head; her eyes rested on his breath-dampened beard and matted whiskers with the look of severity that had become a habit with her, and her nostrils twitched. But the old

man smelled only of frost and sour sheepskin. "Sober today," she thought, and contentedly laid down her knitting-needles.

"Well, what about the wood-cutting?"

"They've decided to begin on Thursday." Pantelei stroked his moustache. "Thursday morning," he added, sitting down on a chest at the side of the bed. "Well, feeling any better?"

"Just the same. Shooting pains in all my joints."

"And how's Natalya?"

There was a note of anxiety in Ilyinichna's voice as she replied:

"I don't know what to do. She was crying again the other day. I went out in the yard and found someone had left the barn door wide open. I went up to shut it, and there she was standing by the millet bin. I asked her what was the matter, but she said she only had a headache. I can't get the truth out of her."

"Maybe she's poorly?"

"I don't think so. Either someone's given her the evil eye, or else it's Grisha..."

"He hasn't taken up again with that woman, by any chance?"

"Goodness, no! What a thing to say!" Ilyinichna exclaimed in alarm. "What do you take Stepan for—a fool? No, I haven't heard anything."

Pantelei sat with his wife a little longer, then went out. Grigory was in his room sharpening fishing hooks with a file. Natalya was smearing them with lard, and carefully wrapping each in a separate rag. As Pantelei limped by he stared at her inquisitively. Her sallow cheeks were flushed like an autumn leaf. She had grown noticeably thinner during the past month, and there was a new, wretched look in her eyes. The old man paused at the door. "He's killing the girl!" he thought, as he glanced back at Natalya's smooth head bowed over the bench. Grigory sat near the window. His black tousled forelock jerked with every stroke of the file.

The two stood silently regarding each other.

Aksinya glanced cautiously around, then turned her liquid black eyes again to Grigory's face. Shame and joy flamed in her cheeks and dried her lips. Her breath came in sharp gasps.

At a turn in the road Anikushka and Pyotr disappeared behind the brown oak trunks.

Grigory looked straight into Aksinya's eyes and saw in them a spark of stubborn recklessness.

"Well, Grisha, do as you please, but I can't live without you," she said firmly, and pressed her lips together waiting for his answer.

Grigory made no reply. The forest was locked in silence. A glassy emptiness rang in his ears. The surface of the road, polished smooth by sledge-runners, the grey rag of sky, the forest, dumb, deathly drowsy... A sudden cry of a raven nearby seemed to rouse Grigory from his momentary lethargy. He raised his head and watched the bird winging away in silent flight. He was surprised when he heard himself say:

"It's going to be warm. He's making for the warm." He seemed to shake himself and laughed hoarsely. "Well..." He turned his intoxicated eyes furtively on Aksinya, and suddenly snatched her to him.

One Sunday in December a dense crowd of five hundred young Cossacks from all the villages in the district was assembled in the square outside the old church. Mass ended, the senior sergeant, a gallant old Cossack with long-service decorations, gave an order, and the youngsters drew up in two long straggling ranks. Sergeants rushed to and fro to get them dressed off.

"Ranks!" the sergeant boomed and making a vague gesture with his hand, snapped: "Form fours."

The ataman entered the churchyard, dressed according to form and wearing a new officer's greatcoat, his spurs jingling, and followed by the military policeman.

Grigory Melekhov who was standing next to Mitka Korshunov heard him whisper:

"My boot pinches like hell."

"Stick it out, they'll make you an ataman."

"We'll be going inside soon."

As if to confirm this, the senior sergeant fell back a pace or two, turned sharply on his heels and shouted: "Right turn. Forward march!"

The column filed through the wide-open gate, and the church dome rang with the sound of tramping feet.

Grigory paid no attention to the words of the oath of allegiance being read by the priest. By his side stood Mitka Korshunov, his face contorted with the pain of his tight new boots. Grigory's upraised arm grew numb, an aching jumble of thoughts was running through his mind. As he came up to the crucifix and kissed the silver, damp with the moisture of many lips, he thought of Aksinya, and of his wife. With the suddenness of a flash of forked lightning he had a vision of the forest, its brown trunks and branches fluffed with white down, and the humid gleam of Aksinya's black eyes under her kerchief...

When the ceremony was ended they were marched out into the square and were again drawn up in ranks. Blowing his nose and stealthily wiping his fingers on the lining of his coat, the sergeant addressed them:

"You're not boys any longer now, you're Cossacks. You've taken the oath and you ought to understand what's what. You've grown up into Cossacks and you've got to guard your honour, obey your fathers and mothers and all the rest of it. You were boys once, you've had your fun and games—used to play tipcat in the road, I expect—but now you must think about your future service. In a year's time they'll be calling you up into the army..." Here the sergeant blew his nose again, shook his hand clean and, drawing on his rabbit's down gloves, ended: "And your fathers and mothers must think about getting you your equipment. They must fit you out with an army horse, and... in general... And now, home you go and God be with you, my lads."

"Taken the oath?"

"Uh-huh."

Grigory took off his outdoor clothes slowly, playing for time, and turning over in his mind all the possibilities

which might have led to this chilly and silent welcome. Ilyinichna came out of the best room, her face expressing her agitation.

"It's Natalya!" Grigory thought, as he sat down on the bench beside his father.

"Get him some supper," his mother said to Darya, indicating Grigory with her eyes. Darya stopped in the middle of her spinning-song, and went to the stove, her girlish figure swaying from the waist. The kitchen was engulfed in a silence broken only by the heavy breathing of a goat and its newly-born kid.

As Grigory sipped his soup he glanced at Natalya. But he could not see her face. She was sitting sideways to him, her head bent over her knitting-needles. Pantelei was the first to be provoked into speech by the general silence. Coughing artificially, he said:

"Natalya is talking about going back to her parents."

Grigory pressed some bread-crumbs into a ball, and said nothing.

"And why's that?" his father asked, his lower lip quivering: the first sign of a coming outburst of frenzy.

"I don't know," Grigory replied as he rose and crossed himself.

"But I know!" his father raised his voice.

"Who have I done wrong?" Grigory asked.

"You don't know? You don't know, you devil?"

"No, I don't."

Pantelei jumped up, overturning the bench, and went close up to Grigory. Natalya dropped her stocking and the needles clattered to the floor. At the sound a kitten jumped down from the stove and, with its head on one side and paw curved, began to pat the ball of wool towards the chest.

"What I say to you is this," the old man began slowly and deliberately. "If you won't live with Natalya, you can clear out of this house and go wherever your feet will carry you. That's what I say to you. Go where your feet will carry you," he repeated in a calm voice, and turned and picked up the bench.

"I don't say this in anger, Dad," Grigory's voice was jarringly hollow. "I didn't marry of my own choice,

it was you who married me off. As for Natalya, I'm not stopping her. She can go to her father, if she wants to."

"You clear out yourself."

"I will!"

"Go to the devil!"

"I'm going. I'm going, don't be in a hurry."

Grigory reached for the sleeve of his short fur coat lying on the bed, his nostrils dilated, his whole body quivering with a boiling anger that was just like his father's. The same mingled Turkish and Cossack blood flowed in their veins, and at that moment their resemblance to each other was extraordinary.

"Where are you going?" Ilyinichna groaned, seizing Grigory's arm. But he pushed her away forcibly and snatched up his fur cap.

"Let him go, the sinful swine! Let him go, curse him! Go on, go! Clear out!" the old man thundered throwing the door wide open.

Grigory ran out on to the steps, and the last sound he heard was Natalya's loud uncontrollable weeping.

The frosty night held the village in its grip, prickly snow was falling from the black sky, the cracking of the ice on the Don resounded like cannon shots. Grigory ran panting out of the gate. At the far end of the village dogs were barking discordantly, and yellow points of light shone through the frosty haze.

He walked aimlessly down the street. The blackness of the Astakhov's windows gleamed with the brilliance of a diamond.

"Grisha!" he heard Natalya's yearning cry from the gate.

"You go to hell!" Grigory grated his teeth and hastened his steps.

"Grisha, come back!"

He stumbled drunkenly into the first cross-lane, and for the last time heard her distant, anguished cry:

"Grisha, darling..."

He swiftly crossed the square and stopped at a fork in the road, wondering where to spend the night. He decided on Misha Koshevoi. Misha lived with his mother, sister and two little brothers in a lonely straw-

thatched house right by the hill. Grigory entered their yard and knocked at the tiny window.

"Who is it?"

"Is Misha there?"

"Yes, who is it wants him?"

"It's me, Grigory Melekhov."

After a moment, Misha, awakened from his first sleep, opened the door.

"You, Grisha?"

"Me."

"What do you want at this time of night?"

"Let me in, we'll talk inside."

In the passage, Grigory gripped Misha's elbow and cursing himself for being unable to find the right words, whispered: "I want to spend the night with you. I've fallen out with my people. Have you got room for me? Anywhere will do."

"We'll fix you up somewhere. What's the row about?"

"I'll tell you later... Where's the door here? I can't see it."

In the morning he awoke and at once remembered what it was—his army service! How could he go away with Aksinya? In the spring there was the training camp, and in the autumn the army draft.

He had some breakfast, and called Misha out into the passage.

"Misha, go to the Astakhovs for me, will you?" he said. "Tell Aksinya to come to the windmill this evening after dark."

"But what about Stepan?" Misha said hesitantly.

"Say you've come on some business or other."

"All right, I'll go."

"Tell her to be sure to come."

"Oh, all right."

In the evening Grigory went to the mill and sat there smoking, hiding the cigarette in his cuff. Beyond the mill the wind was stumbling over withered maize stalks. A scrap of torn canvas flapped on the chained and motionless sail. It sounded like a great bird

flapping round the mill, unable to fly away. Aksinya did not appear.

He smoked three cigarettes in succession, thrust the last end into the trodden snow, and gazed round in anxious irritation. Half-thawed cart-tracks from the mill to the village showed darkly in the snow. There was no one in sight. He rose, stretched himself, and moved towards the light twinkling invitingly in Misha's window. He was approaching the yard, whistling through his teeth, when he stumbled into Aksinya. She had evidently been running; she was out of breath, and the faint scent of the winter wind, or perhaps of fresh steppe hay, came from her fresh cold mouth.

"I waited and waited, I thought you weren't coming."

"I had to get rid of Stepan."

"You've made me frozen, you wretch!"

"I'm hot, I'll warm you." She flung open her wool-lined coat and wrapped herself round Grigory like hops round an oak.

"Why did you send for me?"

"Take your arms away, somebody may pass."

"You haven't quarrelled with your people, have you?"

"I've left them. I spent the night with Misha. I'm a homeless dog now."

"What will you do now?" Aksinya relaxed the grip of her arms and drew her coat tight with a shiver. "Let's go over to the fence, Grisha. We can't stand here in the middle of the road."

They turned off the road, and Grigory, sweeping away the drift-snow, leaned against the frosty crackling wattle fence.

"You don't know whether Natalya has gone home, do you?"

"I don't...She'll go, I expect. How can she stay here?"

Grigory slipped Aksinya's frozen hand up the sleeve of his coat, and squeezing her slender wrist, he said:

"And what about us?"

"I don't know, dear. Whatever you think best."

"Will you leave Stepan?"

"Without a sigh. This evening, if you like."

"And we'll find work somewhere, and live somehow."

"They can put me in the shafts as long as I'm with you, Grisha. Anything to be with you."

Next morning Grigory went to see Mokhov. Mokhov had just returned from the shop and was sitting with Atypin in the dining-room with its rich oak-coloured wall-paper, sipping strong, claret-coloured tea. Grigory left his cap in the hall and went in.

"I'd like to have a word with you, Sergei Platonovich."

"Ah, Pantelei Melekhov's son, isn't it? What do you want?"

"I've come to ask whether you could give me a job."

As Grigory spoke the door creaked, and a young officer in a khaki tunic with a lieutenant's epaulettes entered. Grigory recognized him as young Listnitsky. Mokhov moved a chair up for the officer, and turned back to Grigory.

"Well, I'd gladly take you on. I know your family to be a hard-working lot, but I'm afraid I haven't any work for you to do."

"What's the matter?" Listnitsky inquired, pulling his chair up to the table.

"This lad is looking for work."

"Can you look after horses? Can you drive a team?" the officer asked as he stirred his tea.

"I can. I've had the care of our own six horses."

"I want a coachman. What are your terms?"

"I'm not asking for much."

"In that case come to my father at our estate tomorrow. You know the house? At Yagodnoye, about twelve versts from here."

"Yes, I know it."

"Then come tomorrow morning and we shall settle the matter."

Grigory went to the door. As he turned the handle he hesitated, and said: "I'd like to have a word with you in private, Your Honour."

Listnitsky followed Grigory out into the semi-darkness of the passage. A rosy light filtered dimly through the Venetian glass of the door leading to the balcony.

"Well, what is it?"

"I'm not alone. . . ." Grigory flushed darkly. "I've got a woman with me. . . . Perhaps you can find something for her to do?"

"Your wife?" Listnitsky inquired, smiling and raising his eyebrows.

"Someone else's."

"Oh, I see. All right, we'll fix her up as cook for the servants. But where is her husband?"

"Here in the village."

"So you've stolen another man's wife?"

"She wanted to come."

"A romantic affair! Well, come along tomorrow. You may go now."

Grigory arrived at Yagodnoye at about eight the next morning. The house was surrounded by a peeling brick and plaster wall. Outbuildings straggled over the big yard: a wing with a tiled roof, the date 1910 picked out with tiles of a different colour; the servants' quarters, a bath-house, stables, poultry-house and cattleshed, a long barn and coach-house.

The maid conducted Grigory to the house. The hall reeked of dogs and uncured pelts. On a table lay the case of a double-barrelled gun and a game-bag with a frayed green silk fringe.

"The young master will see you," the maid called to Grigory through a side door.

Grigory glanced apprehensively at his muddy boots, and entered. Listnitsky was lying on a bed next to the window. On the cider-down was a box containing tobacco and smoking utensils. The officer made himself a cigarette, buttoned up the collar of his white shirt, and remarked:

"You're in good time. Wait, my father will be here in a minute."

Grigory stood by the door. Presently he heard the sound of footsteps in the ante-room, and a deep bass voice asked through the door: "Are you asleep, Yevgeny?"

"Come in."

An old man wearing black Caucasian felt boots

entered. Grigory gave him a sideways glance. He was immediately struck by the thin crooked nose and the white arch of his moustache, stained yellow by tobacco under the nose. Old Listnitsky was tall and broad-shouldered, but gaunt. He wore a long camel-hair tunic that hung loosely, the collar encircling his brown wrinkled neck like a noose. His faded eyes were set close to the bridge of his nose.

"Papa, here's the coachman I spoke to you about. The lad's from a decent family."

"Whose son is he?" the old man asked in a booming voice.

"Melekhov's."

"Which Melekhov's?"

"Pantelei Melekhov's."

"I knew Prokofy, I remember Pantelei too. Lame, isn't he?"

"Yes, Your Excellency," Grigory replied, coming stiffly to attention. He recalled his father's stories of the retired General Listnitsky, a hero of the Russo-Turkish war.

"You want work for your wife as well?"

"That's right, Your Excellency."

"None of your 'excellencies.' I don't like them. Your wage will be eight rubles a month. For both of you. Your wife will cook for the servants and seasonal workers. Is that satisfactory?"

"Yes."

"Move in tomorrow morning. You'll occupy the previous coachman's quarters."

Yevgeny Listnitsky held a commission as lieutenant in the Ataman's Lifeguards Regiment. Having had a tumble during the officers' hurdle races and broken his left arm, he took furlough when he came out of hospital and went to stay with his father for six weeks.

The old general lived alone at Yagodnoye. He had lost his wife while driving in the suburbs of Warsaw in the 1880s. Shots fired at the Cossack general had missed him, but riddled the carriage, killing his wife and coachman. Listnitsky was left with his two-year-old son,

Yevgeny. Soon after this event the general retired, abandoned an estate of ten thousand acres in the Saratov Province which had been granted to his great-grandfather in recognition of his services during the war of 1812, and moved to Yagodnoye, where he lived an austere and rigorous life.

He sent his son Yevgeny to the cadets' corps as soon as the lad was old enough, and occupied himself with farming. He purchased blood stock from the imperial stables, crossed them with the finest mares from England and from the famous Provalsky stables, and reared a new breed. He raised cattle and livestock on his own, and bought land, sowed grain (with hired labour), hunted with his borzois in the autumn and winter, and occasionally locked himself in the dining-hall and drank for weeks on end. He was troubled with a stomach complaint, and his doctor had strictly forbidden him to swallow anything solid; he had to extract the goodness from all his food by mastication, spitting out the residue on to a silver tray held by his personal servant Venyamin.

Venyamin was a half-witted, swarthy young peasant, with a shock of thick black hair. He had been in Listnitsky's service for six years. When he first had to wait on the general it made him feel sick to watch the old man spitting out the chewed food. But he got used to it.

The other inhabitants of the estate were the cook Lukerya, the ancient stableman Sashka, and the shepherd Tikhon. From the very first the flabby pock-marked Lukerya, who with her huge bottom looked like a yellow lump of unrisen dough, would not allow Aksinya near the stove.

"You can cook when the master takes on extra workers in the summer. Now I can manage by myself."

Aksinya was set to work washing the floors of the house three times a week, feeding the innumerable fowls, and keeping the fowl-house clean. She worked with a will, trying to please everyone, even the cook. Grigory spent much of his time in the spacious log-built stables with Sashka the stableman. The old man was one mass of grey hair, but everybody still familiarly called him "Sashka." Probably even old Listnitsky, for whom

he had worked more than twenty years, had forgotten his surname. In his youth Sashka had been the coachman, but as he grew old and feeble and his sight began to fail he was made stableman. Stocky, covered with greenish-grey hair (even the hair on his hands was grey), with a nose that had been flattened by a club in his youth, he wore an everlasting childish smile and gazed out on the world with blinking artless eyes. The apostolic expression of his face was marred by his broken nose and his hanging scarred underlip.

During the first days of Grigory's life on the estate he was frequently in the young master's company. One day Venyamin came smiling into the servants' quarters and, bowing his fuzzy head, announced:

"The young master wants you, Grigory."

Grigory, as on many other occasions, went to Yevgeny's room and stood at the door. The master pointed to a chair. Grigory seated himself on the very edge.

Screwing up his piercing grey eyes, the young master said: "You have to go to the training camp in May, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I'll speak to the ataman about it. You won't have to go."

"Thank you, sir."

There was a momentary silence. Unbuttoning the collar of his uniform, Yevgeny scratched his womanishly white chest.

"Aren't you afraid of Aksinya's husband taking her from you?"

"He's thrown her over; he won't take her back."

"How do you know?"

"I saw one of the men from the village the other day when I went there for nails. He told me Stepan was drinking hard. Says he doesn't want Aksinya any more, thinks he'll find someone hotter."

"Aksinya's a fine-looking woman," Listnitsky remarked thoughtfully, staring over Grigory's head with something licentious in his smile.

"Not bad," Grigory agreed, and his face clouded.

Yevgeny's furlough was nearly over. He no longer wore a sling and could bend this arm freely.

During the last few days of his stay Yevgeny spent a great deal of his time in Grigory's room. Aksinya had whitewashed the dirt-caked walls, scrubbed the window-frames, and scoured the floor with broken brick. There was a feminine warmth and cosiness in the cheerful empty little room. The officer, his short, fashionably-cut coat thrown over his shoulders, chose times for his visits when Grigory was occupied with the horses. He would first go into the kitchen, stand joking with Lukerya for a minute or two, then pass into the farther room. He would sit down on a stool, hunching his shoulders, and fix a shamelessly smiling gaze on Aksinya. She was embarrassed by his presence, and the knitting-needles trembled in her fingers.

"Well, Aksinya, how are you getting on?" he would ask, puffing at his cigarette until the room was filled with blue smoke.

"Very well, thank you." Aksinya would raise her eyes, and meeting the lieutenant's transparent gaze, silently telling of his desire, she turned crimson. That naked stare of his was unpleasant and annoying. She replied disconnectedly to his questions, avoiding his eyes and seeking an opportunity to leave the room.

"I must go and feed the ducks now."

"There's no hurry. The ducks can wait," he smiled, and his legs trembled in his tight riding breeches, and he continued to ply her with questions concerning her past life, using the deep tones of his voice, which was like his father's and pleading lewdly with his crystal-clear eyes.

When Grigory came in, the fire would die out of Yevgeny's eyes and he would offer him a cigarette, leaving soon after.

"What did he want?" Grigory would ask Aksinya, not looking at her.

"How should I know?" Remembering the officer's look, Aksinya would laugh forcedly. "He came in and just sat there like this, Grisha; and sat and sat until

I was sick of him."

"Did you ask him in?" Grigory's eyes would narrow angrily.

"What do I need him for?"

"You watch out, or I'll kick him down the steps one day."

Aksinya would gaze at Grigory with a smile on her lips, and not be sure whether he was speaking in jest or earnest.

Natalya still lived in the belief that Grigory would return to her; her heart longed and waited for him, and would not listen to the warning whisper of sober reason. She spent the nights in weary yearning, tossing on her bed, crushed by her undeserved and unexpected shame. Another woe was now added to the first, and she waited its sequel in cold terror, fluttering about in her maiden room like a wounded lapwing in a forest glade. From the earliest days of her return home her brother Mitka had begun to give her odd glances, and one day, catching her in the porch, he asked frankly:

"Still hankering after Grisha?"

"What's it got to do with you?"

"I want to cheer you up."

Natalya glanced into his eyes and was terrified by what she saw there. Mitka's green cat's eyes glittered and their slits gleamed greasily in the dim light of the porch. Natalya slammed the door and ran to her grandfather's room, where she stood listening to the wild beating of her heart. The next day Mitka came up to her in the yard. He had been turning over fresh hay for the cattle, and green stalks of grass hung from his straight hair and his fur cap. Natalya was chasing the dogs away from the pigs' trough.

"Don't fret yourself, Natalya...."

"I'll tell Father," she cried, raising her hands to protect herself.

"You're an idiot!"

"Keep away, you beast!"

"What are you shouting for?"

"Go away, Mitka! I'll go at once and tell Father."

How dare you look at me like that? Have you no shame! It's a wonder the earth doesn't open and swallow you up."

"Well, it doesn't, does it?" Mitka stamped with his boots to confirm the statement and edged up to her.

"Don't come near me, Mitka!"

"I won't now, but I'll come at night. By God, I'll come!"

Trembling, Natalya left the yard. That evening she made her bed on the chest, and took her younger sister to sleep with her. All night she tossed and turned, her burning eyes seeking to pierce the darkness, her ears alert for the slightest sound, ready to scream the house down.

Natalya's affected liveliness died away like a spark in the wind. The women's conversation turned to the latest scandal, to tittle-tattle and gossip. Natalya knitted in silence. She forced herself to sit on until the party broke up, and then went home, with a half-formed decision in her mind. Shame for her uncertain situation (for she still would not believe that Grigory had gone for ever, and was ready to forgive him and take him back) drove her on to a further step. She resolved to send a letter secretly to him, in order to learn whether he had gone for good or whether he might change his mind. When she reached home she found Grishaka sitting in his little room reading an old, greasy leather-bound copy of the Gospels. Her father was in the kitchen mending a fishing-net and listening to a story Mikhei was telling him about a recent murder. Her mother had put the children to bed and was asleep over the ledge above stove, the blackened soles of her feet facing the door. Natalya took off her jacket and wandered aimlessly about the rooms. In one corner of the front room there was a pile of hempreed and the mice could be heard scampering and squeaking.

She stopped for a moment in her grandfather's room, staring dully at the stack of devotional books under the icons.

"Grandad, have you any paper?"

"What sort of paper?" Grishaka asked, puckering

his forehead into a frown.

"Paper to write on."

The old man fumbled in a psalter, and drew out a crumpled sheet of paper that smelt strongly of incense.

"And a pencil?"

"Ask your father. Go away, my dear, and don't bother me."

She obtained a stump of pencil from her father, and sitting down at the table, struggled again with the thoughts that had tortured her for so long, thoughts that evoked a numb, gnawing pain in her heart.

She wrote:

Grigory Panteleyevich,

Tell me how I am to live, and whether my life is quite lost or not. You left home and you didn't say a single word to me. I haven't done you any wrong, and I've waited for you to untie my hands, to say you've gone for good, but you've gone away and are as silent as the grave.

I thought you had gone off in the heat of the moment, and waited for you to come back, but I don't want to come between you. Better one should be trodden into the ground than two. Have pity for once and write. Then I shall know what to think, but now I stand in the middle of the road.

Don't be angry with me, Grisha, for the love of Christ.
Natalya.

Next morning she promised vodka to Het-Baba and persuaded him to ride with the letter to Yagodnoye. Moody in expectation of his drinking spell, Het-Baba led a horse into the yard, and without informing his master went jogging off to Yagodnoye.

On his horse he looked awkward, as any stranger among Cossack riders does; his ragged elbows jerked as he trotted. The Cossack children playing in the street sent him off with jeering cries.

"Dirty Ukrainian!"

"Mind you don't fall off!"

"Looks like a dog on a fence!"

He returned in the afternoon. He brought with

him a piece of blue sugar-bag paper, and as he drew it out of his pocket he winked at Natalya.

"The road was terrible. I got such a shaking it near brought my liver up."

Natalya read the note, and her face turned grey. The four words scribbled on the paper entered her heart like sharp teeth rending a weave.

Live alone.—Grigory Melekhov.

Hurriedly, as though not trusting her own strength, Natalya went into the house and lay down on her bed. Her mother was lighting the stove for the night, in order to have the place tidy early on Easter Sunday morning and to get the Easter cake ready in time.

"Natalya, come and give me a hand," she called to her daughter.

"I've got a headache, Mamma, I'll lie down for a bit."

Her mother put her head in at the door. "Drink some pickle juice, it'll put you right in no time."

Natalya licked her cold lips with her dry tongue and made no reply.

She lay until evening, her head covered with a warm woollen shawl, a light tremor shaking her huddled body. Miron and Grishaka were about to go off to church when she got up and went into the kitchen. Beads of perspiration shone on her temples under her smoothly-combed hair, and her eyes were dim with an unhealthy, oily film.

As Miron fastened his fly-buttons, he glanced at his daughter:

"A fine time to fall sick, Daughter. Come along with us to the service."

"You go, I'll come along later."

"In time to go home again, I expect?"

"No, I'll come when I've dressed."

The men went out. Lukinichna and Natalya were left in the kitchen. Natalya went listlessly backward and forward from the chest to the bed, stared with unseeing eyes at the jumbled heap of clothing in the chest, her lips whispering the same agonizing thoughts in her

mind. Lukinichna decided she could not make up her mind which clothes to wear, and with motherly kindness she suggested: "Wear my blue skirt, dear. It will just fit you. Shall I get it for you?"

Natalya had had no new clothes made for Easter, and Lukinichna, suddenly remembering how before she married her daughter had loved to wear her dark-blue hobble skirt, pressed Natalya to take it, thinking she was worried about what to wear.

"No, I'll go in this!" Natalya carefully drew out her green skirt, and suddenly remembered that she had been wearing it when Grigory first visited her as her future bridegroom, when he had shamed her with that first fleeting kiss by the barn. Shaking with sobs, she fell forward against the raised lid of the chest.

"Natalya, what is the matter?" her mother exclaimed, clapping her hands.

Natalya choked down her desire to scream and, mastering herself, gave a rasping, wooden laugh.

"I don't know what's come over me today."

"Oh, Natalya, I've noticed. . . ."

"Well, and what have you noticed, Mamma?" she cried with unexpected irritation, crumpling the green skirt in her fingers.

"You can't go on like this; what you need is a husband."

"One was enough for me!"

She went to her room, and quickly returned to the kitchen, dressed, girlishly slender, a bluish mournful flush in her pallid cheeks.

"You go on, I'm not ready yet," her mother said.

Pushing a handkerchief into her sleeve, Natalya went out. The rumble of the floating ice and the bracing tang of thaw dampness was wafted to her on the wind. Holding up her skirt in her left hand, picking her way across the pearly-blue puddles, she reached the church. On the way she attempted to recover her former comparatively tranquil state of mind, thinking of the holiday, of everything vaguely and in snatches. But her thoughts returned stubbornly to the scrap of blue paper hidden at her breast, to Grigory and the happy woman who was

now complacently laughing at her, perhaps even pitying her.

As she entered the churchyard some lads barred her way. She passed round them, and heard the whisper:

"Who is she? Did you see?"

"Natalya Korshunova."

"She's ruptured, they say. That's why her husband left her."

"That's not true. She got playing about with her father-in-law, lame Pantelei."

"Oh, so that's it! And is that why Grigory ran away from home?"

"That's right. And she's still at it. . . ."

Stumbling over the uneven stones, followed by the shameful, filthy whispering, she reached the church porch. The girls standing in the porch giggled as she turned and made her way to the farther gate. Swaying drunkenly, she ran home. At the gate of the yard she took a quick breath and then entered, stumbling over the hem of her skirt, biting her lips till the blood came. Through the lilac darkness the open doorway of the shed yawned blackly. With fierce determination she gathered her last strength, ran to the door and hastily stepped across the threshold. The shed was dry and cold, and smelled of leather harness and musty straw. Gropingly, without thought or feeling, in a sombre yearning which clawed at her shamed and despairing soul, she made her way to a corner. There she picked up a scythe by the handle, removed the blade (her movements were deliberately assured and precise), and, throwing back her head, in a sudden joyous fire of resolution slashed her throat with its point. She fell as though struck down by the burning, savage pain, and vaguely aware that she had not completely carried out her intention, she struggled on to all fours, then on to her knees. Hurriedly (she was terrified by the blood pouring over her chest), with trembling fingers she tore off the buttons of her jacket, then with one hand she drew aside her taut, unyielding breast, and with the other she guided the point of the scythe. She crawled on her knees to the wall, thrust the blunt end of the scythe blade into it,

and throwing her arms behind her head, pressed her chest firmly forward, forward. . . . She clearly heard and felt the revolting cabbage-like scrunch of the rending flesh; a rising wave of intense pain flowed over her breast to her throat, and pressed ringing needles into her ears. . . .

Stepan walked up to Grigory and, seizing the horse's stirrup, pressed hard against its sweating flank.

"Well, how are you, Grigory?"

"Praise be!"

"What are you thinking about? Huh?"

"What should I be thinking about?"

"You've carried off another man's wife. . . . Having your will of her?"

"Let go of the stirrup."

"Don't be scared! I won't hit you."

"I'm not afraid. Don't start that!" Grigory flushed and raised his voice.

"I shan't fight you today. I don't want to. . . . But mark my words, Grigory, sooner or later I'll kill you."

"We'll see", the blind man said!"

"Mark my words well. You've wronged me. You've gelded my life like a hog's. You see there. . ." he stretched out his hands with their grimy palms upward. "I'm ploughing, and the Lord knows what for. Do I need it for myself? I could shift around a bit and get through the winter that way. It's only the loneliness of it all that gets me down. You've done me a great wrong, Grigory."

"It's no good complaining to me. The full man doesn't understand the hungry."

"That's true," Stepan agreed, staring up into Grigory's face. And suddenly he broke into a simple, boyish smile which splintered the corners of his eyes into tiny cracks. "I'm sorry only for one thing, lad, very sorry. . . . You remember the year before last, that village fight at Shrovetide?"

"No, I don't."

"The day they killed the fuller. When the single men fought the married, don't you remember? Re-

member how I chased after you? You were young and weak then, a green rush compared to me. I spared you that time, but if I'd hit you as you were running away, I'd have split you in two. You ran quickly, all springy-like; if I'd struck you hard in the ribs you wouldn't be living in the world today."

"Don't let it worry you, we'll have another go at each other yet."

Stepan rubbed his forehead as though trying to recall something. Old Listnitsky, leading his horse by the reins, called to Grigory. Still holding the stirrup with his left hand, Stepan walked alongside the stallion. Grigory watched his every movement. He noticed Stepan's drooping chestnut moustache, the heavy scrub on his long-unshaven chin, the cracked patent-leather strap of his military cap. His dirty face, marked with white runnels of sweat was sad and strangely unfamiliar. As he looked Grigory felt that he might well be gazing from a hilltop at the distant steppe veiled in a rainy mist. A grey weariness and emptiness ashened Stepan's features. He dropped behind without a word of farewell. Grigory rode on at a walk.

"Wait a bit. And how is ... how is Aksinya?"

Knocking a lump of earth off his boot with the whip, Grigory replied: "Oh, she's all right."

He halted the stallion and glanced back. Stepan was standing with his feet planted wide apart, chewing a stalk between his teeth. For a moment Grigory suddenly felt unaccountably sorry for him, but jealousy rose uppermost. Turning in his saddle, he shouted:

"She doesn't miss you, don't worry!"

"Is that so?"

Grigory lashed his horse between the ears and galloped away without replying.

Aksinya confessed her pregnancy to Grigory only during the sixth month, when she was no longer able to conceal it from him. She had kept silent so long because she was afraid he would not believe it was his child she was carrying. During the first months of anxious expectation she had sometimes been sick without

Grigory noticing it, or if he had noticed it, without his guessing the reason why.

Wrought up, she told him one evening, anxiously scanning his face the while for any change in its expression. But he turned away to the window and coughed with vexation.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I was afraid to, Grisha. I thought you might throw me over...."

Drumming his fingers on the back of the bed, he asked:

"Is it to be soon?"

"The beginning of August, I think."

"Is it Stepan's?"

"No, it's yours!"

"So you say."

"Reckon up for yourself. From the day of the wood-cutting it's...."

"Don't make things up, Aksinya! Even if it was Stepan's, what could you do about it? I want an honest answer."

Weeping angry tears, Aksinya sat down on the bench and broke into a fierce whisper.

"I lived with him so many years and nothing ever happened! Think for yourself! I'm not an ailing woman.... I must have got it from you....And you...."

Grigory talked no more about the matter. A new thread of wary aloofness and a light mocking pity was woven into his attitude to Aksinya. She withdrew into herself, asking for no favours. During the summer she lost her good looks, but pregnancy hardly affected her shapely figure; her general fullness concealed her condition, and although her face was thinner it gained a new beauty from her warmly-glowing eyes. She easily managed her work as cook, especially as that year fewer labourers were employed on the estate.

Old Sashka grew fond of Aksinya, with the capricious fondness of old age. Perhaps it was because she treated him with daughterly care: washed his linen, mended his shirts, gave him softer bits at the table.

After seeing to his horses old Sashka would come into the kitchen, fetch water, mash potatoes for the pigs, do all kinds of odd jobs, and hopping about round her, expose the bare gums of his mouth as he said:

"You're good to me, and I'll repay you. I'll do anything for you, Aksinya. I'd have been done for without a woman's care. The lice were eating me up. If you ever want anything, just ask me."

Yevgeny had arranged for his coachman to be freed from the spring training camp, and Grigory worked at the mowing, occasionally drove old Listnitsky to the district centre, and spent the rest of the time hunting with him after bustards. The easy-going, comfortable life began to spoil him. He grew lazy and stout, and looked older than his years. The only thing that worried him was the thought of his forthcoming army service. He had neither horse nor equipment, and he could hope for nothing from his father. He saved the wages he received for himself and Aksinya, and even stinted himself on tobacco, hoping to be able to buy a horse without having to beg from his father. Old Listnitsky also promised to help him. Grigory's presentiment that his father would give him nothing was quickly confirmed. At the end of July Pyotr visited his brother, and in the course of conversation mentioned that his father was as angry with him as ever, and had declared that he wouldn't help him get a horse. "Let him go to the local command for one," he had said.

"He needn't worry, I'll go to do my service on my own horse," Grigory declared, stressing "my own."

"How'll you get it? Dance for it?" Pyotr asked, chewing his moustache.

"I'll dance for it, or beg for it, and if I can't get it that way I'll steal it."

"Good lad!"

"I'm going to buy a horse with my wages," Grigory said more seriously.

A week before Christmas Pantelei arrived unexpectedly at Yagodnoye. He did not drive into the yard, but tied up his horse and basket sledge at the gate, and

limped towards the servants' quarters, rubbing the icicles off his beard that hung like a black log over the collar of his coat. Grigory happened to be looking out of the window and saw his father approaching.

"Well I'm . . . Father!"

For some reason Aksinya ran to the cradle and wrapped up the child. Pantelei stumped into the room, bringing a breath of cold air with him. He removed his fur cap and crossed himself facing the icon, then gazed slowly around the room.

"Good health!"

"Good-morning, Father!" Grigory replied, rising from the bench and striding to the centre of the room.

Pantelei offered Grigory an icy hand, and sat down on the edge of the bench, wrapping his sheepskin around him. He scarcely glanced at Aksinya, who stood very still by the cradle.

"Getting ready for your service?"

"Of course."

Pantelei was silent, staring long and questioningly at Grigory.

"Take your things off, Father, you must be frozen."

"It doesn't matter."

"We'll get the samovar going."

"Thank you." The old man scraped an old spot of mud off his coat with his finger-nail, and added: "I've brought your kit; two coats, a saddle, and trousers. You'll find them all there in the sledge."

Grigory went out and removed the two sacks of equipment from the sledge. When he returned his father rose from the bench.

"When are you going off?" he asked his son.

"The day after Christmas. You aren't going already, are you, Father?"

"I want to get back early."

He took leave of Grigory, and still avoiding Aksinya's eyes, went towards the door. As he lifted the latch he turned his eyes in the direction of the cradle, and said:

"Your mother sends her greetings. She's in bed with trouble in her legs." After a momentary pause, he said heavily: "I shall ride with you to Mankovo."

Be ready when I come."

He went out thrusting his hands into warm, knitted gloves. Aksinya, pale with the humiliation she had suffered, said nothing. Grigory paced the room, glancing sideways at Aksinya as he passed her, and constantly stepping on a creaking board.

On Christmas Day Grigory drove his master to Vyeshenskaya. Listnitsky attended mass, had breakfast with his cousin, a local land-owner, and then ordered Grigory to get the sleigh ready for the return journey. Grigory had not finished his bowl of rich pork and cabbage soup, but he rose at once, went to the stable, and harnessed the dapple-grey trotting-horse to the light sleigh.

"Tell the master we're ready," Grigory shouted to the maid that came to the steps of the house.

Listnitsky came out and climbed into the sleigh, his whiskers buried in the collar of his raccoon coat. Grigory wrapped up his legs and adjusted the velvet-lined wolf-skin.

"Warm him up," Listnitsky said glancing at the horse.

Leaning back in his seat, his hands tense on the quivering reins, Grigory watched the ruts, anxiously remembering the far from feeble box on the ears the master had given him for handling the sleigh awkwardly one day early in winter. As they drove down to the Don Grigory released his grip on the reins and rubbed his wind-seared cheeks with his glove.

They arrived at Yagodnoye within two hours. Listnitsky had been silent throughout the drive, occasionally tapping Grigory on the back with his finger as a signal to stop while he rolled and lit a cigarette. Only as they were descending the hill to the house did he ask:

"Early tomorrow morning?"

Grigory turned sideways in his seat, and dragged his frozen lips apart with difficulty. His tongue, stiff with cold, seemed to swell and stick to the back of his teeth.

"Yes," he managed to reply.

"Got all your money?"

"Yes."

"Don't worry about your wife, she'll be all right with us. Be a good soldier; your grandfather was a fine Cossack. And mind," Listnitsky's voice grew muffled as he hid his face from the wind in the collar of his coat, "and mind you conduct yourself in a manner worthy of your grandfather and father. Your father received the first prize for trick riding at the Imperial Review, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well then!" the old man ended with a stern note in his voice, as though admonishing Grigory, and buried his face once more in his fur coat.

At the yard Grigory handed over the horse to Sashka, and turned to go to the servants' quarters.

"Your father's arrived," Sashka shouted after him.

Grigory found Pantelei sitting at the table, eating meat jelly. "Tight!" Grigory decided, glancing at his father's flushed face.

"So you're back, soldier?"

"I'm frozen," Grigory answered, clapping his hands together. Turning to Aksinya, he added: "Untie my hood, my fingers are too stiff."

"You must have had the wind against you," his father grunted, chewing steadily.

This time his father was in a kindlier mood, and ordered Aksinya about as if he were in his own home. "Don't be so stingy with the bread, cut some more," he told her.

When he had finished he rose from the table and went towards the door to have a smoke in the yard. As he passed the cradle he rocked it once or twice, pretending that the action was accidental, and asked: "A Cossack?"

"A girl," Aksinya replied for Grigory; and catching the expression of dissatisfaction that passed over the old man's face, she hurriedly added: "She's the image of Grisha!"

Pantelei attentively examined the dark little head sticking out of the clothes, and declared, not without

a touch of pride: "She's of our blood. . . ! Well, I never!"

"How did you come, Father?" Grigory asked.

"With the mare and Pyotr's horse."

"You need only have used one, and we could have harnessed mine for the journey to Mankovo."

"Let him go light. He's not a bad horse, you know."

They were both troubled by the same thought, but they talked of various trivial matters. Aksinya took no part in the conversation, and sat on the bed. Her full breasts swelled tightly under her blouse. She had grown noticeably stouter since the birth of the child, and had a new, confidently happy air.

It was late when they went to bed. As she nestled close at Grigory's side, Aksinya moistened his shirt with her tears and the over-abundant milk seeping from her breasts.

"I shall pine away. What shall I do without you?"

"You'll be all right," Grigory murmured.

"The long nights . . . the child awake . . . Just think, Grisha! Four years!"

"In the old days service lasted twenty-five years, they say."

"What do I care about the old days?"

"Come now, enough of that!"

Grigory fell asleep a little before dawn. Aksinya got up and fed the child, then lay down again. Leaning on her elbows she gazed unblinkingly into Grigory's face, and took a long farewell of him. She recalled the night when she had tried to persuade him to go away with her to the Kuban; it had been the same as now, except that there had been a moon flooding the yard outside the window with its white light. The same, and Grigory was still the same, yet not the same. Behind them both lay a long track trodden out by the passing days.

He rode his horse alongside his father's sledge. After a few moments the old man turned his back to his horses and asked:

"So you're not thinking of living with your wife?"

"That old story again? We've had that out already...."

"So you're not."

"No, I'm not!"

"You haven't heard that she laid hands on herself?"

"Yes, I've heard. I happened to meet a man from the village."

"And in the sight of God?"

"Why, Father, after all... it's no use crying over spilt milk."

"Don't use that devil's talk to me. What I'm saying to you, I'm saying for your own good," Pantelei flared up.

"I've a child back there. What's the use of talking? You can't push the other on to me now...."

"Are you sure you're not rearing another man's child?"

Grigory turned pale; his father had touched a sore spot. Ever since the child was born he had tormentedly nursed the suspicion in his mind, while concealing it from Aksinya and from himself. At night, when Aksinya was asleep, he had more than once gone to the cradle and stared down at the child, seeking his own features in its swarthy rosy face, and had turned back to bed as uncertain as before. Stepan was dark-chestnut, almost as dark as he, and how was he to know whose blood flowed in the child's veins? At times he thought the child resembled him, at other times she was painfully like Stepan. Grigory had no feeling for her, except perhaps hostility as he recalled the moments he had lived through when he had driven Aksinya back from the steppes in the throes of child-birth. Once when Aksinya was busy in the kitchen, he had had to change the child's wet napkin. As he did so he had felt a sharp, burning emotion. He had bent stealthily over the cradle and pressed the baby's pink stiff toe between his teeth.

His father probed mercilessly at the wound, and Grigory, his palm resting on the saddle-bow, numbly replied:

"Whoever it belongs to, I won't leave the child."

Pantelei waved his whip at the horses without turning round:

"Natalya's spoilt her good looks. She carries her head on one side like a paralytic. It seems she cut a tendon." He lapsed into silence.

The runners creaked as they cut through the snow; the hoofs of Grigory's horse clicked as they knocked together.

"And how is she now?" Grigory asked, studiously picking a burr out of his horse's mane.

"She got over it somehow or other. She was laid up seven months. On Trinity Sunday she was all but gone. Father Pankraty came to say prayer. And then she began to pick up. She'd tried to stab herself with a scythe but her hand shook and she just missed her heart. It would have been the end of her otherwise...."

"Quicker down the hill!" Grigory said, standing in his stirrups and using his whip; the horse leaped forward, sending a shower of snow from its hoofs over the sledge, and broke into a trot.

"We're taking Natalya in," Pantelei shouted, coming up with him. "The woman doesn't want to live with her own folk. I saw her the other day and told her to come to us."

Grigory made no reply. They drove as far as the first village without exchanging a word, and his father made no further reference to the subject.

That day they covered seventy versts. They arrived at Mankovo the following evening as dusk was falling, and spent the night in the quarters allotted to the Vyeshenskaya recruits.

Next morning the district ataman took the Vyeshenskaya recruits before the medical commission. Grigory fell in with the other lads from his own village. In the morning Mitka Korshunov, riding a tall bay horse equipped with a new and gaily-ornamented saddle and harness, had passed Grigory standing at the door of his quarters, but had gone by without a word of greeting.

The men undressed in turn in the cold room of the local civil administration. Military clerks hustled around, and the adjutant to the provincial ataman hurried past in short patent-leather boots. From an inner room came the sound of the doctors' orders, and snatches of talk.

Grigory got undressed beside a tall red-haired lad from another village. A clerk came out and, straightening his shoulders so that his tunic creased at the back, curtly called Grigory and the other lad into the examination room.

By the end of the examination the officers at the table had decided that Grigory would have to be drafted into an ordinary regiment.

"The Twelfth Regiment, Melekhov. D'you hear?" he was told.

A day later a train of red railway trucks loaded with horses, Cossacks and forage left for Voronezh. In one of them stood Grigory. Past the open door crawled an unfamiliar, flat landscape; a blue and tender thread of forest whirled by in the distance. Behind him the horses were munching hay and stepping from hoof to hoof as they felt the unsteady floor beneath them. The wagon smelled of wormwood, horses' sweat, and the spring thaw; a distant thread of forest lurked on the horizon, blue, pensive, and as inaccessible as the faintly-shining evening-star.

It was on a warm and cheerful spring day in March, 1914 that Natalya returned to her father-in-law's house. Pantelei was mending the broken wattle fence with fluffy dove-coloured twigs. The silvery icicles hanging from the roofs were dripping, and the traces of former runnels showed like black tar stains under the eaves. A ruddier, warmer sun caressed the melting hills, and the earth was swelling; the early grass looked like green malachite on the bare chalky headlands that bulged from the hill beyond the Don.

Natalya, thinner and much changed, approached her father-in-law from behind and bowed her scarred, slightly crooked neck:

"Good health, Father!"

"Natalyushka! Welcome, my dear, welcome!" Pantelei exclaimed fussing over her. The twigs dropped out of his hand. "Why haven't you been to see us? Come in, Mother will be right glad to see you."

"Father, I've come...." Natalya stretched out her hand uncertainly, and turned away. "If you don't drive me away, I'd like to stay with you always," she added.

"And why shouldn't you, my dear? Are you a stranger to us? Look, Grigory has written about you in his letter. He's told us to ask about you."

They went into the kitchen. Pantelei limped about in joyful agitation. Ilyinichna wept as she embraced Natalya.

"You want a child," she whispered. "That would win him. Sit down. I'll get you some pancakes, shall I?"

Dunya, flushed and smiling, came running into the kitchen and embraced Natalya round the knees. "You shameless thing! You forgot all about us!" she reproached her.

"Now then, you madcap!" her father shouted at her with feigned severity.

"How you've grown!" Natalya murmured, pulling Dunya's arms apart and looking into her eyes.

They all talked together, interrupting one another. Ilyinichna, supporting her cheek on her palm, grieved as she looked at Natalya, so changed from what she had been.

"You've come for good?" Dunya asked, clasping Natalya's hands.

"Who knows...?"

"Why, where else should my own daughter-in-law live? You'll stay with us," Ilyinichna decided, as she pushed a platter of pancakes across the table.

Natalya had come to her husband's parents only after long vacillation. At first her father would not let her go. He shouted at her in indignation when she suggested it, and attempted to persuade her against such a step. But it was difficult for her to look her own

people in the face; since her attempted suicide she felt that with her own family she was almost a stranger. For his part, after he had seen Grigory off to the army Pantelei was continually wheedling her to come, for he was determined to have her back and to reconcile Grigory to her.

From that day in March Natalya lived with the Melekhovs. Pyotr was friendly and brotherly; Darya gave little outward sign of her dissatisfaction, but her occasional sidelong glances were more than compensated by Dunya's attachment and the parental attitude of the old people.

The very day after Natalya came to them Pantelei ordered Dunya to write a letter to Grigory.

Grigory's regiment was stationed at a little place called Radzivillovo some four versts from the Russo-Austrian frontier. He rarely wrote home. To the letter informing him that Natalya was living with his father he wrote a cautiously worded reply, and asked his father to greet her in his name. All his letters were non-committal and obscure in their meaning. Pantelei made Dunya or Pyotr read them to him several times, pondering over the thought concealed between the lines. Just before Easter he wrote and asked Grigory definitely whether on his return from the army he would live with his wife or with Aksinya as before.

Grigory delayed his reply. Only after Trinity Sunday did they receive a brief letter from him. Dunya read it quickly, swallowing the ends of her words, and Pantelei had difficulty in grasping the essential thought among the numerous greetings and inquiries. At the end of the letter Grigory dealt with the question of Natalya:

You asked me to say whether I shall live with Natalya or not, but I tell you, Father, once a thing's been cut off, you can't stick it on again. And how shall I make it up with Natalya, when you know yourself that I have a child. And I can't promise anything, it is painful for me to talk about it. The other day a fellow was caught smuggling goods across the frontier and we happened to

see him. He said there would be war with the Austrians soon, that their tsar has come to the frontier to see where to begin the war from and which land to grab for himself. If war begins maybe I shan't be left alive, and nothing can be settled beforehand.

Natalya worked for her foster-parents and lived in continual hope of her husband's return. She never wrote to Grigory, but nobody in the family yearned with more pain and desire to receive a letter from him.

Life in the village continued in its inviolable order, Cossacks who had served their term in the army returned home, on workdays dull labour imperceptibly consumed the time, on Sunday mornings the village poured in family droves into the church: the Cossacks in tunics and holiday trousers, the women in long, coloured skirts that swept the dust, and embroidered blouses with puff sleeves.

Night after night an owl screeched from the belfry. The cries surged terrifyingly over the village, and the owl flew from the belfry to the cemetery and moaned over the brownish grassy mounds of the graves.

"There's trouble brewing," the old men prophesied, as they listened to the owl screeching from the cemetery.

"There's war coming. An owl called just like that before the Turkish campaign."

"Perhaps there will be cholera again."

"Expect no good when it flies from the church to the dead."

Talking with the old men in the market place, Pantelei solemnly announced:

"Our Grigory writes that the Austrian tsar has come to the frontier, and has given orders to collect all his troops in one place and to march on Moscow and Petersburg."

The old men remembered past wars, and shared their apprehensions with one another.

"But there won't be any war," one objected. "Look at the harvest."

"The harvest has nothing to do with it. It's the students giving trouble, I expect."

"In any case we shall be the last to hear of it. But who will the war be with?"

"With the Turks, about the sea. They can't come to an agreement on how to divide the sea."

"Is it so difficult? Let them divide it into two strips, like we do the meadowland."

The talk turned to jest, and the old men went about their business.

The early meadow hay was waiting to be mown. The fading grass beyond the Don, which was not a patch on the grass of the steppe, was sickly and scentless. It was the same earth, yet the grass drank in different juices. In the steppe there was black soil, so heavy and firm that the herd left no traces where they passed over it. The grass there was strong and fragrant. But along the Don banks the soil was damp and rotten, growing a poor and scrubby grass which even the cattle would not always look at.

An incident which occurred on the third day after their arrival at Radzivillovo made a painful impression on Grigory, and indeed on all the young Cossacks. They were being instructed in cavalry drill, and the horse ridden by Prokhor Zykov, the lad with gentle eyes, who often dreamed of his faraway Cossack village, was a wild, spirited animal and happened to kick the sergeant-major's mount as it passed. The blow was not very hard and it only grazed the skin on the horse's left leg. But the sergeant-major struck Prokhor across the face with his whip, and riding straight at him, shouted:

"Why the hell don't you look where you're going, you son of a bitch? I'll show you.... You'll spend the next three days on duty!"

The squadron commander happened to witness the scene, but he turned his back, fingering the sword-knot of his sabre and yawning with boredom. His lips trembling, Prokhor rubbed a streak of blood from his swollen cheek.

Pulling his horse into line, Grigory looked at the officers, but they continued their conversation as if nothing untoward had occurred. Five days later

Grigory dropped a bucket into the well. The sergeant-major swooped on him like a hawk, and raised his fist.

"Don't you touch me," Grigory said huskily, looking into the rippling water below.

"What? Climb down and get it, you bastard! I'll smash your face in for this!"

"I'll get it, but don't you touch me," Grigory said slowly, without raising his head.

If there had been any Cossacks at the well, the sergeant-major would undoubtedly have beaten Grigory, but they were attending to their horses at the fence and could not hear what was going on. The sergeant-major approached Grigory, glancing back at the Cossacks, his bulging eyes insane with rage as he hissed:

"Who do you think you are? How dare you speak to your superior in this way?"

"Don't look for trouble, Semyon Yegorov."

"Are you threatening me? I'll..."

"Look here," Grigory said, raising his head from the well. "If you strike me—I'll kill you. Understand?"

The sergeant-major's great carp-like mouth gaped in amazement but no answer came. The moment for punishment had been missed. Grigory's greyish face boded nothing good. The sergeant-major was non-plussed. He walked away from the well, slipping in the mud, and when some distance away, turned and shook his huge fist.

"I'll report you to the squadron commander," he shouted. "Yes, I'll report you."

However, for some unknown reason, he did not report Grigory. But for about a fortnight afterwards he was always finding fault with him and appointing him for sentry duty out of turn.

The dreary, monotonous order of existence crushed the spirit out of the young Cossacks. Until sundown they were kept continually at foot and horse exercises, and in the evening the horses had to be groomed and fed. At ten o'clock, after roll call and stationing of guards, they were drawn up for prayers, and the sergeant-major, his eyes wandering over the ranks before him, intoned the Lord's prayer.

In the morning the same routine began again, and the days were as like one another as peas.

In the whole of the estate there were only two women: the old wife of the steward, and the steward's pretty young housemaid, a Polish girl Franya. Franya often ran from the house to the kitchen where the old, browless army cook was in charge. Winking and heaving exaggeratedly loud sighs, the troops drilling on the parade ground watched every movement of the girl's grey skirt as she ran across the yard. Feeling the gaze of Cossacks and officers fixed upon her, she bathed in the streams of lasciviousness that came from three hundred pairs of eyes, and swung her hips provocatively as she ran backward and forward between the kitchen and the house, smiling at each troop in turn, and at the officers in particular. Although all fought for her attentions, rumour had it that only the squadron commander had won them.

One day in early spring Grigory was on duty in the stables. He spent most of his time at one end, where the officers' horses were excited by the presence of a mare. He had just given the squadron commander's horse a taste of the whip and was attending to his own. With a sidelong glance at its master the horse went on champing the hay, its grazed hind-foot lifted off the ground. As he adjusted the halter, Grigory heard a sound of struggling and a muffled cry coming from the dark corner at the far end of the stable. Startled by the unusual noise, he hurried past the stalls. His eyes were suddenly blinded as someone slammed the stable door, and he heard a suppressed voice calling.

"Hurry up, boys!"

Grigory hastened his steps, and called out:

"Who's there?"

The next moment he bumped into one of the sergeants, who was groping his way to the door. "That you, Melekhov?" the sergeant whispered, putting his hand on Grigory's shoulder.

"Stop! What's up?"

The sergeant burst into a guilty snigger and seized

Grigory's sleeve. "We.... Hey, where're you going?" Tearing his arm away, Grigory ran and threw open the door. In the deserted yard a draggle-tailed hen, unaware that the cook already had designs on her for the steward's soup the next day, was scratching some dung in search of a place to lay her egg.

The light momentarily blinded Grigory; he shaded his eyes with his hand and turned round, hearing the noise in the dark corner of the stable growing louder. He ran towards the sound, and was met by Zharkov, buttoning up his trousers.

"What the... what are you doing here?"

"Hurry up!" Zharkov whispered, breathing bad breath in Grigory's face. "It's wonderful.... They've dragged the girl Franya in there... laid her out!" His snigger suddenly broke off as Grigory sent him flying against the log wall of the stable. Grigory's eyes grew accustomed to the darkness and there was fear in them as he ran towards the noise. In the corner, Grigory found a crowd of Cossacks of the First Troop. He silently pushed his way through them, and saw Franya lying motionless on the floor, her head wrapped in horse-cloths, her dress torn and pulled back above her breasts, her legs, white in the darkness, flung out shamelessly and horribly. A Cossack had just risen from her; grinning sheepishly, he was stepping back to make way for the next. Grigory tore his way back through the crowd and ran to the door, shouting for the sergeant-major. But the other Cossacks ran after him and caught him at the door. They dragged him back, putting their hands over his mouth. He tore one man's tunic from hem to collar and gave another a kick in the stomach, but the others pinned him down. As they had done to Franya, they wound a horse-cloth round his head and tied his hands behind him, then, keeping quiet so that he should not recognize their voices, threw him into an empty manger. Choking in the stinking horse-cloth, he tried to shout, and kicked furiously at the partition. He heard whispering in the corner, and the door creaking as the Cossacks went in and out. He was set free some twenty minutes later. The sergeant-major and two

Cossacks from another troop were standing at the door. "You just keep your mouth shut!" the sergeant-major said to him, winking hard and glancing over his shoulder.

"Don't blab or we'll tear your ears off," Dubok, a Cossack from another troop, said with a grin.

The two Cossacks went in and lifted up the motionless bundle that was Franya (her legs were parted stiffly under her skirt), and climbing on to a manger, thrust it through a hole left in the wall by a loose plank. The wall bordered on the orchard. Above each stall was a tiny, grimy window. Some of the Cossacks clambered on to the stall partitions to watch what Franya would do, others hastened out of the stables. Grigory, too, was seized by a bestial curiosity, and gripping a cross-beam, he drew himself up to one of the windows and looked down. Dozens of eyes stared through the dirty windows at the girl lying under the wall. She lay on her back, her legs crossing and uncrossing like scissor blades, her fingers scrabbling in the snow by the wall. Grigory could not see her face but he heard the suppressed breathing of other Cossacks at the windows, and the soft and pleasant crunch of hay under their feet.

She lay there a long time, and at last struggled on to her hands and knees. Her arms trembled, hardly able to bear her. Grigory saw that clearly. Swaying, she scrambled to her feet, and, dishevelled, unfamiliar, hostile, she passed her eyes in a long, slow stare over the windows.

Then she staggered away, one hand clinging to the woodbine bushes, the other groping along the wall.

Grigory jumped down from the partition and rubbed his throat, feeling that he was about to choke. At the door someone, afterwards he could not even remember who, said to him in distinct and unequivocal tones:

"Breathe a word . . . and by Christ, we'll kill you!"

On the parade ground the troop commander noticed that a button had been torn from Grigory's greatcoat, and asked:

"Who have you been wrestling with? What style d'you call this?"

Grigory glanced down at the little round hole left by the missing button; overwhelmed by the memory, for the first time in years he felt like crying.

The village tavern was closed. The military police officer had a gloomy and care-worn look. The women, attired in their holiday clothes, lined the fences along the streets. One word was on everybody's lips: "Mobilization." Intoxicated, excited faces. The general anxiety had been communicated to the horses, and they were kicking and plunging and snorting angrily. The square was strewn with empty bottles and wrappers from cheap sweets. A cloud of dust hung low in the air.

Some four days later the red trucks of the troop trains were carrying the Cossack regiments and batteries towards the Russo-Austrian frontier.

"War...."

From the stalls came the snorting of horses and the damp stench of dung.

The same kind of talk in the wagons, the songs mostly of this kind:

*The Don's awake and stirring,
The quiet and Christian Don,
In obedience to the call,
The monarch's call, it marches on.*

At the stations the Cossacks were eyed with inquisitive, benevolent looks. People stared curiously at the stripes on the Cossacks' trousers, at their faces, still dark from their recent labour in the fields.

"War...."

The regiment was detrained at a station some thirty-five versts from the Austrian frontier. Dawn was breaking behind the station birch-trees. The morning promised to be fine. The engine fussed and rumbled over the tracks. The lines glittered under a varnish of dew. The Cossacks of the Fourth Squadron led their horses by the bridles out of the wagons and over the level-crossing, mounted, and moved off in column forma-

tion. Their voices sounded eerily in the crumbling, lilac darkness. Faces and the contours of horses emerged uncertainly out of the gloom.

"What squadron is that?"

"And who are you? Where've you come from?"

"I'll show you who I am! How dare you speak to an officer in that way?"

"Sorry, Your Honour, didn't recognize you."

"Ride on! Ride on!"

The squadron crossed the Austrian frontier at noon. The horses leaped the broken black-and-white pole of the frontier post. From the right came the rumble of gunfire. In the distance the red-tiled roofs of a farm showed up in the perpendicular rays of the sun. A bitter-tasting cloud of dust settled thickly on everything. The regimental commander issued orders for advance patrols to be detached and sent ahead. The Third Troop under Lieutenant Semyonov was sent out from the Fourth Squadron. The regiment, split up into squadrons, was left behind in a grey haze. A detachment of some twenty Cossacks rode past the farm along the rutted road.

There was not a soul in the village. The patrol forded the river. The water reached the horses' bellies, they entered willingly and tried to drink, but their riders pulled at the reins and urged them on. Grigory stared thirstily down at the turbid water, close yet inaccessible; it drew him almost irresistibly. Had it been possible he would have jumped out of his saddle and lain without undressing with the stream murmuring over him until his sweating chest and back were shivering with cold.

From the rise beyond the village they saw a distant town; square blocks of houses, brick buildings, gardens, and church spires. The officer rode to the top of the hill and put his binoculars to his eyes.

"There they are," he shouted, the fingers of his left hand playing nervously.

The sergeant-major rode to the sun-baked crest followed by the other Cossacks in single file, and stared. They saw tiny figures scurrying about the town. Wagons dammed up the side streets; horsemen were galloping to

and fro. With eyes screwed up, gazing from under his palm, Grigory was able to distinguish even the grey, unfamiliar colour of the uniforms. Before the town stretched the brown lines of freshly-dug trenches, with men swarming about them.

"What a lot of them!" Prokhor said with a gasp.

The others, all gripped by the same feeling, were silent. Grigory listened to the quickening throb of his heart and realized that the feeling he was experiencing at the sight of these foreigners was something quite different from what he had felt in the face of "the enemy" on manoeuvres.

The sergeant-major drove the Cossacks hurriedly back down the rise. The lieutenant made some pencil notes in his field notebook, and then beckoned to Grigory:

"Melekhov!"

"Sir!"

Grigory dismounted and went to the officer, his legs feeling like stone after the long ride. The officer handed him a folded paper.

"You've got the best horse. Deliver this to the regimental commander. At a gallop!"

Grigory put the paper in his breast-pocket and went back to his horse, slipping his chin-strap under his chin as he went. The officer watched him until he had mounted, then glanced at his wrist-watch.

The regiment had nearly reached the village of Korolyovka when Grigory rode up with the report. After reading it the colonel gave an order to his adjutant, who galloped off to the First Squadron.

The Fourth Squadron streamed through Korolyovka and, as quickly as though on the parade ground, spread out in formation over the fields beyond. Lieutenant Semyonov rode up with his men. The horses tossed their heads to shake off the horse-flies, and there was a continual jingle of bridles. The noise of the First Squadron passing through the village sounded heavily in the midday silence.

Junior Captain Polkovnikov rode on his prancing horse to the front of the ranks. Gathering the reins

tightly in one hand, he dropped the other to his sword-knot. Grigory held his breath and awaited the word of command. There was a rumble of hoofs on the left flank as the First Squadron got into position.

The officer wrenched his sabre from its sheath; the blade gleamed like blue light.

"Squadron!" He swung his sabre to the right, then to the left, and finally lowered it in front of him, holding it poised above the horse's ears. Grigory tried to think what the next order would be. "Lances at the ready! Sabres out! Into the attack...gallop!" The officer snapped, and gave his horse the rein.

The earth groaned dully under the crushing impact of a thousand hoofs. Grigory, who was in the front ranks, had hardly brought his lance to the ready when his horse, carried away by a lashing flood of other horses, broke into a gallop and went off at full speed. Ahead of him the figure of the commanding officer bobbed up and down against the grey background of the field. A black wedge of ploughed land sped irresistibly towards him. The First Squadron raised a surging quivering shout, the Fourth Squadron took it up. The ground streaked past close under the horses' straining bellies. Through the roaring whistle in his ears Grigory caught the sound of distant firing. The first bullet whined high above them, furrowing the glassy vault of the sky. Grigory pressed the hot shaft of his lance against his side until it hurt him and his palm sweated. The whistle of flying bullets made him duck his head down to the wet neck of his horse, and the pungent scent of the animal's sweat penetrated his nostrils. As though through the misty glass of binoculars he saw the brown ridges of trenches, and men in grey running back to the town. A machine-gun hurled a fan of whistling bullets tirelessly at the Cossacks; in front of them and under the horses' feet the bullets tore up woolly spurts of dust.

The part of Grigory that before the attack had sent the blood coursing faster through his veins now turned to stone within him; he felt nothing except the ringing in his ears and a pain in the toes of his left foot. His thoughts, emasculated by fear, congealed in a heavy

mass in his head.

Cornet Lyakhovsky was the first to drop from his horse. Prokhor rode over him. Grigory glanced back, and a fragment of what he saw was impressed on his memory as though cut with a diamond on glass. As Prokhor's horse leaped over the fallen cornet, it bared its teeth and stumbled. Prokhor was catapulted out of the saddle and, falling headlong, was crushed under the hoofs of the horse behind him. Grigory heard no cry, but from Prokhor's face, with its distorted mouth and its calf-like eyes bulging out of their sockets, he realized that he must be screaming inhumanly. Others fell, both horses and Cossacks. Through the film of tears caused by the wind in his eyes Grigory stared ahead at the grey, seething mass of Austrians fleeing from the trenches.

The squadron, which had torn away from the village in an orderly stream, now scattered and broke into fragments. Those in front, Grigory among them, had nearly reached the trenches, others were lagging behind.

A tall, white-eyebrowed Austrian, his cap drawn over his eyes, fired almost point-blank at Grigory. The heat of the bullet scorched his cheek. He struck with his lance, at the same time pulling on the reins with all his strength. The blow was so powerful that it plunged for half a shaft length into the Austrian's body. Grigory was not quick enough to withdraw the lance. He felt a quivering convulsion in his hand, and saw the Austrian, bent right back so that only the point of his unshaven chin was visible, clutching the shaft and clawing at it with his nails. Grigory dropped the lance and felt with numbed fingers for his sabre-hilt.

The Austrians fled into the streets of the town. Cossack horses reared up over the grey clots of their uniforms.

In the first moment after dropping his lance Grigory, without knowing why, turned his horse and saw the sergeant-major gallop past him, his lips parted in a snarl. Grigory struck at his horse with the flat of his sabre; arching its neck, it carried him away down the street.

An Austrian was running along by the railings of a garden, swaying, without a rifle, his cap clutched in his

hand. Grigory saw the back of his head and the damp collar of his tunic. He overtook him and, lashed on by the frenzy of the moment, whirled his sabre above his head. The Austrian was running close to the railings on the left-hand side, and it was awkward for Grigory to hew him down. But, leaning over his saddle, holding his sabre aslant, he struck at the man's temple. Without a cry the Austrian pressed his hand to the wound and spun around with his back to the railings. Grigory rode past reining in his horse, turned round, and rode back at a trot. The square fear-contorted face of the Austrian was black as cast iron. His arms hung at his sides, his ashen lips were quivering. The sabre had struck him a glancing blow on the temple, and the flesh was hanging over his cheek like a crimson rag. The blood streamed on to his uniform. Grigory's eyes met the terror-stricken eyes of the Austrian. The man was sagging at the knees; a gurgling groan came from his throat. Screwing up his eyes, Grigory swept his sabre down. The blow split the cranium in two. The man flung out his arms and fell; his shattered skull knocked heavily against the stone of the road. At the sound Grigory's horse reared and, snorting, carried him into the middle of the street.

Ragged firing sounded in the streets. A foaming horse carried a dead Cossack past Grigory. One foot was caught in the stirrup, and the horse was dragging the bruised and battered body over the stones. Grigory saw only the red stripe on the trousers and the torn green tunic drawn in a bundle over the head.

Grigory felt a leaden heaviness in his head. He slipped from his horse and shook his head vigorously. Cossacks of the Third Squadron galloped by. A wounded man was carried past on a greatcoat. A crowd of Austrian prisoners were driven past at a trot. The men ran in a huddled grey herd, their iron-shot boots clattering joylessly on the stones. Grigory saw them as a jellied blob, the colour of clay. He dropped his horse's reins and went cross to the Austrian soldier he had cut down. The man lay where he had fallen, by the fanciful wrought-iron work of the railings, his dirty brown

palm stretched out as though begging. Grigory glanced at his face. It seemed small, almost childlike, despite the hanging moustache and the tortured expression (was it from physical suffering or a joyless past?) of the harsh, distorted mouth.

"Hey, you!" a strange Cossack officer shouted as he rode down the middle of the street.

Grigory looked up and stumbled across to his horse. His steps were heavy and tottering, as though he were carrying an unbearable weight on his back. Loathing and bewilderment crushed his spirit. He took the stirrup in his hand, but for a long time could not lift his heavy foot into it.

"Germany has declared war on us..."

Along the ranks ran a whisper as though a puff of wind had rippled across a field of ripe, heavy-eared oats. A horse's neigh slashed through it. Round eyes and gaping mouths turned in the direction of the First Squadron where the animal had dared to neigh.

The colonel said much more. He chose his words carefully, seeking to arouse a feeling of national pride. But the picture that rose before the thousand Cossacks was not of silken foreign banners falling rustling at their feet, but of their own everyday life thrown into confusion, of their wives, children, sweethearts, of ungathered grain, and orphaned villages in distress.

"In two hours we entrain..." was the only thought that penetrated all minds.

The officers' wives, who were standing in a bunch not far away, wept into their handkerchiefs. Lieutenant Khoprov had almost to carry away in his arms his blonde pregnant Polish wife.

The regiment rode singing to the station. The Cossacks' voices drowned the band, and it lapsed into confused silence. The officers' wives rode in drozhkis, a colourful crowd foamed along the pavements, the horses' hoofs raised a cloud of dust. Laughing at his own and others' sorrow, twitching his left shoulder so that his blue shoulder-strap tossed hectically, the leading singer struck up a bawdy Cossack song. Deliberate-

ly running the words into one another, to the accompaniment of newly shod hoofs the squadron carried its song along to the red trucks at the station. The adjutant, his face purple with laughter and embarrassment, galloped up to the singers. One of the Cossacks winked cynically at the crowd of women seeing them off, and it was not sweat but a bitter brew of wormwood that streamed down his bronzed cheeks to the black tips of his mouth.

The second and third lines of reserves were called up together. The villages of the Don were as deserted as though everybody had gone out to mow or reap at the busy time of harvest.

But a bitter harvest was reaped along the frontiers that year, death dogged the footsteps of the men, and many a Cossack's wife wailed bare-headed for her departed one: "Oh, my darling, who has taken you from me?" The dear heads were laid low on all sides, the Cossack blood was shed, and glassy-eyed, unwakeable, they rotted while the artillery thundered its funeral dirge in Austria, in Poland, in Prussia. . . . For the eastern wind did not carry the weeping of their wives and mothers to their ears.

The flower of the Cossackry had left the villages and perished amid the lice and horror of the battlefields.

One pleasant September day a milky gossamer web, fine and cottony, hung over the village of Tatarsky. The bloodless sun smiled like one bereft, the stern, virginal blue sky was repellently clear and proud. Beyond the Don the forest was a jaundiced yellow, the poplar glamed pallidly, the oak dropped occasional figured leaves; only the alder remained gaudily green, gladdening the keen eye of the magpie with its hardiness.

That day Pantelei Prokofyevich received a letter from the army on active service. Dunya brought it back from the post. As the postmaster handed it to her he bowed, shook his old bald pate, and deprecatingly opened his arms.

"Forgive me for the love of God for opening the letter. Tell your father I opened it. I badly wanted

to know how the war was going. . . . Forgive me and tell Pantelei Prokofyevich what I said." He seemed confused and, unaware of the ink-smear on his nose, came out of his office with Dunya, muttering something unintelligible. Filled with foreboding, she returned home, and fumbled at her breast a long time for the letter.

"Hurry up !" Pantelei shouted, plucking at his beard.

As she drew it out she said breathlessly :

"The postmaster told me he had read the letter and that you mustn't be angry with him."

"The devil take him ! Is it from Grigory?" the old man asked, breathing agitatedly into her face. "From Grigory? Or from Pyotr?"

"No, Father. . . . I don't know the writing."

"Read it !" Ilyinichna cried, tottering heavily to the bench. Her legs were giving her much trouble these days. Natalya ran in from the yard and stood by the stove with her head on one side, her elbows pressing into her breasts. A smile trembled like sunlight on her lips. She still hoped for a message from Grigory or the slightest reference to her in his letters, in reward for her dog-like devotion and fidelity.

"Where's Darya?" Ilyinichna whispered.

"Shut up!" Pantelie shouted. "Read it!" he added to Dunya.

" 'I have to inform you' " she began, then, slipping off the bench where she had been sitting, she screamed :

"Father! Mother...! Oh, Mama... Our Grisha...! Oh, oh...! Grisha's ... been killed."

Entangled among the leaves of a half-dead geranium, a wasp beat against the window, buzzing furiously. In the yard a hen clucked contentedly; through the open door came the sound of ringing, childish laughter.

A shudder ran across Natalya's face, though her lips still wore her quivering smile. Rising to his feet, his head twitching paralytically, Pantelei stared in frantic perplexity at Dunya.

The communication read :

I have to inform you that your son Grigory Panteleyevich Melekhov, a Cossack in the Twelfth Don Cossack

Regiment, was killed on the 16th of September near the town of Kamenka-Strumilovo. Your son died the death of the brave; may that be your consolation in your irreplaceable loss. His personal effects will be handed to his brother, Pyotr Melekhov. His horse will remain with the regiment.

*Commander of the Fourth Squadron,
Junior Captain Polkovnikov.*

Field Army

18th September, 1914.

After the arrival of the letter Pantelei seemed suddenly to wilt. He grew noticeably older every day. His memory began to go and his mind lost its clarity. He walked about with bowed back, his face an iron hue; and the feverish gleam in his eyes betrayed his mental stress.

He put the letter away under the icon. Several times a day he went into the porch to beckon to Dunya. When she came in he would order her to get the letter and read it to him, fearfully glancing at the door of the best room where his wife was mourning. "Read it quietly, to yourself like," he would say, winking cunningly. Choking down her tears, Dunya would read the first sentence, and then Pantelei, squatting on his heels, would raise his huge, hoof-like brown hand:

"All right. I know the rest. Take the letter back and put it where you found it. Quietly, or Mother. . . ." And he would wink repulsively, his whole face contorted like burnt tree-bark.

He began to go grey, and the dazzling grey hairs swiftly patched his head and wove threads into his beard. He grew gluttonous too, and gobbled his food.

Each licked the wound in his own way. When Natalya heard Dunya scream that Grigory was dead she ran into the yard. "I'll kill myself. It's all over for me," the thought drove her on like fire. She struggled in Darya's arms, and then with joyful relief she swooned, for at least it postponed the moment when consciousness would return and violently remind her

of what had happened. She passed a week in dull oblivion, and returned to the world of reality changed, quieter, gnawed by a black impotence.

An invisible corpse haunted the Melekhovs' house and the living breathed in its mouldering scent.

On the twelfth day after the news of Grigory's death the Melekhovs received two letters by the same post from Pyotr. Dunya read them at the post office, and went speeding home like a stalk caught up by the wind, then swayed and stopped, leaning against a fence. She caused a great fluster in the village, and carried an indescribable feeling of agitation into the house.

"Grisha's alive! Our dear one's alive!" she sobbed and cried when still some distance away. "Pyotr's written. Grisha's wounded, but he isn't dead. He's alive, alive!"

In his letter dated September 20th, Pyotr had written:

Greetings, dear parents, I must tell you that our Grisha all but gave up the ghost, but now, glory be, he's alive and well, as we wish you in the name of the Lord God health and well-being. Close to the town of Kamenka-Strumilovo his regiment was in battle, and in the attack the Cossacks of his troop saw him cut down by a Hungarian hussar, and Grigory fell from his horse and after that nobody knew anything, and when I asked them they could tell me nothing. But afterwards I learned from Misha Koshevoi that Grigory lay till night-time, but that in the night he came round and started crawling away. He crawled along making his way by the stars, and came across one of our officers wounded in the belly and legs by a shell. He picked him up and dragged him for six versts. And for this Grigory has been given the Cross of St. George and has been raised to the rank of corporal. Think of that! His wound isn't serious, he only received a skin wound on the scalp, but he fell from his horse, and got stunned. Misha told me he is already back at the front. You must excuse this letter, I'm writing in the saddle.

In his second letter Pyotr asked his family to send

him some dried cherries from their own orchard, and told them not to forget him but to write more often.

Old Pantelei was a pitiful sight to see. He was dazed with joy. He seized both letters and went into the village with them, stepping all who could read and forcing them to read the letters. It was not vanity but belated joy made him brag all through the village.

"Aha! What do you think of my Grisha?" he raised his hand when the stumbling reader came to the passage where Pyotr described Grigory's exploit. "He's the first to get the Cross in our village," he declared proudly. And jealously taking the letters, he would thrust them into the lining of his cap and go off in search of another reader.

When swept out of its normal channel, life scatters into many streams. It is difficult to foresee which it will take in its treacherous and winding course. Where today it trickles, like a rivulet over sand-banks, so shallow that the shoals are visible, tomorrow it will flow rich and full.

Suddenly Natalya came to the decision to go to Aksinya at Yagodnoye, and to ask, to beseech her to return Grigory to her. For some reason it seemed to Natalya that everything depended on Aksinya, that she had only to ask her and Grigory would return, and with him, her own former happiness. She did not stop to consider whether this was possible, or how Aksinya would receive her strange request. Driven on by subconscious motives, she sought to act upon her decision as quickly as possible.

At the end of the month a letter arrived from Grigory. After messages to his father and mother he sent his greeting and regards to Natalya. Whatever the reason inciting him to this, it was the stimulus Natalya required, and she made ready to go to Yagodnoye the very next Sunday.

Yagodnoye also had been plucked of its menfolk by the war. Venyamin and Tikhon had gone, and the place was even sleepier, drearier and more isolated than before. Aksinya waited on the general in Venya-

min's place, while fat-bottomed Lukerya took over all the cooking and fed the fowls. Old Sashka tended the horses and looked after the orchard. There was only one new face, an old Cossack named Nikitich who had been taken on as coachman.

This year old Listnitsky sowed less, and supplied some twenty horses for army remounts, leaving only three or four for the needs of the estate. He passed his time shooting bustards and hunting with the borzois.

Aksinya received only brief, infrequent letters from Grigory, informing her that so far he was well and going through the grind. He had grown stronger, or else he did not want to tell her of his weakness, for he never let slip any complaint that he found active service difficult and dreary. There was a cold note in his letters, as though he had written them because he felt he had to, and only in one did he write: "All the time at the front, and I'm fed up with fighting and carrying death on my back." In every letter he asked after his daughter, telling Aksinya to write about her.

One Sunday she had given her master his breakfast and was standing on the steps when she saw a woman approaching the gate. The eyes under the white kerchief seemed strangely familiar. The woman opened the gate and entered the yard. Aksinya turned pale as she recognized Natalya. She slowly went to meet her. A heavy layer of dust had settled on Natalya's shoes. She halted, her big, toil-roughened hands hanging lifelessly at her sides, and breathed heavily, trying to straighten her scarred neck and failing, so that it seemed she looked sideways. "I've come to see you, Aksinya," she said, running her dry tongue over her lips.

Aksinya gave a swift glance at the windows of the house and silently led Natalya into her room. Natalya followed her. To her straining ears the rustle of Aksinya's skirt seemed unnaturally loud. "There's something wrong with my ears, it must be the heat," the confused thought scratched at her brain with a host of others.

Aksinya closed the door, and standing in the middle

of the room with her hands under her apron, took charge of the situation.

"What have you come for?" she asked stealthily, almost in a whisper.

"I'd like a drink," Natalya replied, staring heavily about the room.

Aksinya waited. Natalya began to speak, with difficulty raising her voice:

"You've taken my husband from me. . . . Give me my Grigory back. You've broken my life. You see how. . . ."

"You want your husband?" Aksinya clenched her teeth, and the words fell steadily like slow raindrops on stone. "You want your husband? Who are you asking? Why did you come? You've thought of it too late. Too late!"

Laughing caustically, her whole body swaying, Aksinya went close up to Natalya. She sneered as she stared in the face of her enemy. There she stood, the lawful but abandoned wife, humiliated, crushed with misery. She who had come between Aksinya and Grigory, separating them, causing a bloody pain in Aksinya's heart. And while she had been wearing herself out with mortal longing, this other one, this Natalya, had been caressing Grigory and no doubt laughing at her, the unsuccessful, forsaken mistress.

"And you've come to ask me to give him up?" Aksinya panted. "You creeping snake! You took Grisha away from me first! You knew he was living with me. Why did you marry him? I only took back my own. He's mine. I have a child by him, but you. . . ."

With stormy hatred she stared into Natalya's eyes, and, waving her arms wildly, poured out a boiling torrent of words.

"Grisha's mine, and I'll give him up to no one! He's mine, mine! D'you hear. . . ? Mine! Clear out, you shameless bitch, you're not his wife. You want to rob a child of its father? And why didn't you come before?"

Natalya went sideways to the bench and sat down, dropping her head and covering her face with her hands.

"You left your husband. Don't shout like that."

"I have no husband but Grisha. No one, nowhere in the whole world." Feeling an anger that could not find vent raging within her, Aksinya gazed at the strand of black hair that had slipped from under Natalya's kerchief.

"Does he need you?" she demanded. "Look at your twisted neck! And do you think he longs for you? He left you when you were well, and is he likely to look at a cripple? I won't give Grisha up! That's all I have to say. Clear out!"

Aksinya grew ferocious in defence of her nest, in revenge for all the suffering of the past. She could see that, despite the slightly crooked neck, Natalya was as good-looking as before. Natalya's cheeks and lips were fresh, untouched by time, while her own eyes were webbed with wrinkles, and all because of Natalya.

"Do you think I had any hope of getting him back by asking?" Natalya raised her eyes, drunk with suffering.

"Then why did you come?" Aksinya panted.

"My yearning drove me on."

Awakened by the voices, Aksinya's daughter stirred in the bed and broke into a cry. The mother took up the child, and sat down with her face to the window. Trembling in every limb, Natalya gazed at the infant. A dry spasm clutched her throat. Grigory's eyes stared at her inquisitively from the baby's face.

Weeping and swaying, she walked out into the porch. Aksinya did not see her off. A minute or two later Sashka came into the room.

"Who was that woman?" he asked, evidently half-guessing.

"Someone from our village."

Natalya walked back about three versts, and then lay down under a wild thorn. Crushed by her yearning, she lay thinking of nothing. Grigory's gloomy black eyes staring out of a child's face were continually before her.

The army command decided on a big cavalry attack on the south-west front with a view to breaking through

the enemy lines, destroying their communications and disorganizing their forces with sudden assaults from the rear. The command set great store by the plan, and large forces of cavalry were concentrated in the area, Yevgeny Listnitsky's regiment among them. The attack was to have begun on August 28th, but a rain storm caused it to be postponed until the following day.

Early in the morning the division was deployed over a huge area in preparation for the offensive.

About eight versts away the infantry on the right flank made a demonstrative attack to draw the fire of the enemy. Also sections of one cavalry division were dispatched in a misleading direction.

In front of Listnitsky's regiment there was no sign whatever of the enemy. About a verst away Yevgeny could see deserted lines of trenches, and behind them rye fields billowing in a wind-driven, bluish early morning mist. The enemy must have learned of the attack in preparation, for during the night they had retired some six versts, leaving only machine-gun nests to harass the attackers.

Behind heavy rainclouds the sun was rising. The entire valley was flooded with a creamy yellow mist. The order came for the offensive to begin, and the regiments advanced. Thousands of horses' hoofs set up a rumbling roar that sounded as though it came from under the ground. Listnitsky reined in his horse to prevent it from breaking into a gallop. A verst was covered, and the level lines of attacking forces drew near to the fields of grain. The rye, higher than a man's waist and entangled with twining plants and grasses, rendered the cavalry's progress extremely difficult. Before them still waved the ruddy heads of rye, behind them it lay crushed and trampled down by hoofs. After four versts of such riding the horses began to stumble and sweat, but still there was no sign of the enemy. Listnitsky glanced at his squadron commander; the captain's face wore an expression of utter despair.

Six versts of terribly heavy going took all the strength out of the horses; some of them dropped under their riders, even the strongest stumbled, exerting all

their strength to keep moving. Now the Austrian machine-guns began to work, spraying a hail of bullets. The rifle fire came in volleys. The murderous fire mowed down the leading ranks. A regiment of lancers was the first to falter and turn; a Cossack regiment broke. A rain of machine-gun bullets lashed them into panic-stricken flight. Owing to the criminal negligence of the High Command, this extraordinarily extensive attack was overwhelmed with complete defeat. Some of the regiments lost half their complement of men and horses. Four hundred Cossacks and sixteen officers were killed and wounded in Listnitsky's regiment alone.

Listnitsky's own horse was killed under him, and he himself was wounded in the head and the leg. A sergeant-major leaped from his horse and picked him up, flung him over his saddle-bow and galloped back with him.

The chief of staff of the division, Staff Colonel Golovachev, took several snap-shots of the attack, and afterwards showed them to some officers. A wounded lieutenant struck him in the face with his fist and burst into tears. Then Cossacks ran up and tore Golovachev to pieces, made game of his corpse, and finally threw it into the mud of a roadside ditch. So ended this brilliantly inglorious offensive.

From a hospital in Warsaw Yevgeny informed his father that he had been given leave and was coming down to Yagodnoye. The old man shut himself up in his room, and came out again only the next day. He ordered Nikitich, the coachman, to harness the trotting horse to the drozhki, had breakfast, and drove to Vyeshenskaya. There he telegraphed four hundred rubles to his son and sent him a short letter.

I am very glad my dear boy, that you have received your baptism of fire. The nobleman's place is out there, not in the palace. You are much too honest and clever to be able to cringe with a peaceful conscience. Nobody in our family has ever done that. For that reason, your grandfather lost favour and died in Yagodnoye,

neither hoping for nor awaiting grace from the Emperor. Take care of yourself, Yevgeny, and get well. Remember, you are all I have in the world. Your aunt sends her love. She is well. As for myself, I have nothing to write. You know how I live. How can things at the front be as they are? Is it possible that we have no people with common sense? I don't believe the newspaper reports. They are all lies, as I know from past years. Is it possible, Yevgeny, that we shall lose the campaign? I am impatiently awaiting you at home.

True, there was nothing in old Listnitsky's life to write about. It dragged on as before, without variation; only the cost of labour rose, and there was a shortage of liquor. The master drank more frequently, and grew more irritable and fault-finding. One day he summoned Aksinya to him and complained:

"You're not attending to your duties. Why was the breakfast cold yesterday? Why wasn't the glass properly cleaned? If it happens again I shall discharge you. I can't stand slovenliness. D'you hear?"

Aksinya pressed her lips together and burst into tears.

"Nikolai Alexeyevich! My daughter is ill. Let me have time to attend to her. I can't leave her."

"What's the matter with the child?"

"She seems to be choking."

"What? Scarlet fever? Why didn't you speak before, you fool? Run and tell Nikitich to drive to Vyeshenskaya for the doctor. Hurry!"

Aksinya ran out, the old man bombarding her the while, with his deep bass voice:

"You fool of a woman, fool!"

Nikitich brought the doctor back the next morning. He examined the unconscious, feverish child, and without replying to Aksinya's entreaties went straight to the master. The old man received him in the ante-room.

"Well, what's wrong with the child?" he asked, acknowledging the doctor's greeting with a careless nod.

"Scarlet fever, Your Excellency!"

"Will it get better? Any hope?"

"Very little. It's dying. Think of its age."

"You fool!" The old man turned livid. "What did you study medicine for? Cure her!" He slammed the door in the doctor's face and paced up and down the hall.

Aksinya knocked and entered. "The doctor wants horses to take him to Vyeshenskaya."

The old man turned on his heel. "Tell him he's a blockhead! Tell him he doesn't leave this place until the child is well. Give him a room and feed him to his heart's content. But he won't go away," he shouted, shaking his bony fist. He strode over to the window, drummed with his fingers for a minute, and then, turning to a photograph of his son as a baby in his nurse's arms, stepped back two paces and stared hard at it, as though unable to recognize the child.

As soon as her child had fallen ill Aksinya had decided that God was punishing her for taunting Natalya. Crushed with fear for the child's life, she lost control of herself, wandered aimlessly about, and could not work. "Surely God won't take her!" the feverish thought beat incessantly in her brain, and not believing, with all her might trying not to believe, that the child would die, she prayed frantically to God for his last mercy, that its life might be spared.

But the fever was choking the little life. The girl lay flat on her back, the breath coming in little hoarse gasps from her swollen throat. The doctor attended her four times a day, and stood of an evening smoking on the steps of the servants' quarters, gazing up at the cold sprinkling of autumn stars.

All night Aksinya remained on her knees by the bed. The child's gurgling rattle wrung her heart.

"Mama. . ." whispered the small parched lips.

"My little one, my little daughter," she groaned; "my flower, don't go away, Tanya. Look, my pretty one, open your little eyes, come back. My dark-eyed darling! Why, oh Lord. . .?"

Occasionally the child opened its inflamed lids, and the bloodshot eyes gave her a wavering glance. The mother caught at the glance greedily. It seemed to be withdrawn into itself, yearning, resigned.

She died in her mother's arms. For the last time

the little mouth gaped, and the body was racked with a convulsion. The tiny head fell back on its mother's arm, and the little Melekhov eyes gazed with an astonished, sombre stare.

Three weeks later Yevgeny Listnitsky sent a telegram saying he was on his way home. A troika of horses was sent to meet him at the station, and everybody on the estate was on tiptoe with expectation. Turkeys and geese were killed, and old Sashka flayed a sheep. The preparations were elaborate enough for a grand ball. The young master arrived at night. A freezing rain was falling, and the lamps flung little fugitive beams of light into the puddles. The horses drew up at the steps, their bells jangling. Throwing his warm cloak to Sashka, Yevgeny, limping slightly and very agitated, walked up the steps. His father hastened to meet him, sending the chairs flying in his progress.

Aksinya served supper in the dining-room, and went to summon them to table. Looking through the key-hole, she saw the old man embracing and kissing his son on the shoulder; the loose flesh of the old man's neck was quivering.

The third day after his arrival Yevgeny sat until late in the evening with old Sashka in the stables, listening to his artless stories of the free life the Don Cossacks had led in bygone days. He left him at nine o'clock. A sharp wind was blowing through the yard; the mud squelched slushily underfoot. A young, yellow-whiskered moon pranced among the clouds. By its light Yevgeny looked at his watch, and turned towards the servants' quarters. He stopped by the steps to light a cigarette, stood thinking for a moment, then, shrugging his shoulders, resolutely mounted the steps. He cautiously lifted the latch and opened the door, passed through into Aksinya's room, and struck a match.

"Who's there?" she asked, drawing the blanket around her.

"It's only me."

"I'll be dressed in a minute."

"Don't trouble. I shall only stop for a moment

or two."

He threw off his overcoat and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"So your little girl died. . . ."

"Yes, she died. . . ." Aksinya exclaimed echoingly.

"You've changed considerably. I can guess what the loss of the child meant to you. But I think you're torturing yourself uselessly; you can't bring her back, and you're still young enough to have children. Take yourself in hand and be reconciled to the loss. After all, you haven't lost everything. All your life is still before you."

He pressed her hand and stroked her caressingly yet authoritatively, playing on the low tones of his voice. He dropped his voice to a whisper and, hearing Aksinya's stifled weeping, began to kiss her wet cheeks and eyes.

Woman's heart is susceptible to pity and kindness. Burdened with her despair, not realizing what she was doing, Aksinya yielded herself to him with all her strong, long dormant passion. But as the devastating, maddening wave of delight abated she came to her senses and cried out sharply; losing all sense of reason or shame she ran out half-naked, in only her shift, on to the steps. Yevgeny hastily followed her out, leaving the door open, pulling on his overcoat as he went. As he mounted the steps to the terrace of the house he smiled joyfully and contentedly.

Lying in his bed, rubbing his soft plump chest, he thought: "From the point of view of an honest man, what I have done is shameful, immoral. Grigory. . . . I have robbed my neighbour; but after all, I have risked my life at the front. If the bullet had been a little more to the right it would have gone through my head and I should have been feeding the worms now. These days one has to live passionately for each moment as it comes. I am allowed to do anything." He was momentarily horrified by his own thoughts; but his imagination again conjured up the terrible moment of attack, and how he had raised himself from his dead horse only to fall again, shot down by bullets. As he dropped off to

sleep he decided: "Time enough for this tomorrow, but now to rest."

Next morning, finding himself alone with Aksinya in the dining-room, he went towards her, a guilty smile on his face. But she pressed against the wall and stretched out her hands, scorching him with her frenzied whisper:

"Keep away, you devil!"

Life dictates its own unwritten laws to man. Within three days Yevgeny went again to Aksinya at night, and she did not refuse him.

A small garden was attached to the eye hospital. There are many such clipped, uninviting gardens on the outskirts of Moscow, where the eye finds no rest from the stony, heavy dreariness of the city, and as one looks at them the memory recalls still more sharply and painfully the wild freedom of the forest.

The civilian patients were in the majority in the hospital, and the wounded soldiers were accommodated in one room. There were five of them: Jan Vareikis, a tall, ruddy-faced, blue-eyed Latvian; Ivan Vrublevsky, a handsome young dragoon from the Vladimir Province; a Siberian rifleman named Kosykh; a restless little yellow soldier called Burdin, and Grigory. At the end of September another was added to the number.

While they were drinking their evening tea they heard a long ring at the bell. Grigory looked out into the corridor. Three people had entered the hall, a nurse and a man in a long Caucasian coat holding a third man under the armpits. The man's dirty soldier's tunic with dark blood-stains on the chest indicated that he had only just arrived from the station. He was operated on the same evening. A few minutes after he had been taken into the operating theatre, the other patients heard the muffled sound of singing. While he was under chloroform and the surgeon was removing the remains of one eye, which had been shattered by a shell splinter, he sang and uttered unintelligible curses. After the operation he was brought into the ward. When the effects of the chloroform passed, he informed

the others that he had been wounded on the German front, that his name was Garanzha, and that he was a machine-gunner, a Ukrainian from Chernigov Province. He made a particular friend of Grigory, whose bed was next to his, and after the evening inspection they would talk a long time in undertones.

"Well, Cossack, how goes it?" he opened their first conversation.

"Rotten."

"Going to lose your eye?"

"I'm having injections."

"How many have you had?"

"Eighteen so far."

"Does it hurt?"

"No, I enjoy it."

"Ask them to cut the eye right out."

"What for? Not everybody has to be one-eyed."

"That's so."

Grigory's jaundiced, venomous neighbour was discontented with everything. He cursed the government, the war, his own lot, the hospital food, the cook, the doctors, everything he could lay his tongue to.

"What did we, you and I, go to war for, that's what I want to know?"

"For the same reason everybody else did."

"Hah! You're a fool! I've got to chew it all over for you! It's the bourgeoisie we're fighting for, don't you see? What are the bourgeoisie? They're birds among the fruit-trees."

He explained the difficult words to Grigory, peppering his speech with invective. "Don't talk so fast. I can't understand your Ukrainian lingo. Speak slower," Grigory would interrupt him.

"I'm not talking so quick as that, my boy. You think you're fighting for the tsar, but what is the tsar? The tsar's a grabber, and the tsaritsa's a whore, and they're both a weight on our backs. Don't you see? The factory-owner drinks vodka, while the soldier kills the lice. The factory-owner takes the profit, the worker goes bare. That's the system we've got. Serve on, Cossack, serve on! You'll earn another cross, a good

one, made of oak."

He spoke in Ukrainian, but on the rare occasions when he grew excited, he would break into pure Russian generously sprinkled with invective.

Day after day he revealed truths hitherto unknown to Grigory, explaining the real causes of war, and jesting bitterly at the autocratic government. Grigory tried to raise objections, but Garanzha silenced him with simple, murderously simple questions, and he was forced to agree.

Most terrible of all, Grigory began to think Garanzha was right, and that he was impotent to oppose him. He realized with horror that the intelligent and bitter Ukrainian was gradually but surely destroying all his former ideas about the tsar, the country, and his own military duty as a Cossack. Within a month of the Ukrainian's arrival the whole system on which Grigory's life had been based was a smoking ruin. It had already grown rotten, eaten up with the canker of the monstrous absurdity of the war, and it needed only a jolt. That jolt was given, and Grigory's artless straightforward mind awoke. He tossed about seeking a way out, a solution to his predicament, and gladly found it in Garanzha's answers.

Late one night Grigory rose from his bed and awoke Garanzha. He sat on the edge of the Ukrainian's bed. The greenish light of the September moon streamed through the window. Garanzha's cheeks were dark with furrows, the black sockets of his eyes gleamed humidly. He yawned and wrapped his legs in the blanket.

"Why aren't you asleep?"

"I can't sleep," Grigory replied. "Tell me this one thing. War is good for one and bad for another, isn't it?"

"Well?" the Ukrainian yawned.

"Wait!" Grigory whispered, blazing with anger. "You say we are being driven to death for the benefit of the rich. But what about the people? Don't they understand? Aren't there any who could tell them, who could go and say: 'Brothers, this is what you are dying for?'"

"How could they? Tell me that! Supposing you did. Here we are whispering like geese in the reeds, but talk

out loud, and they'll have a bullet ready for you. The people are deep in ignorance. The war will wake them up. After the thunder comes the storm."

"But what's to be done about it? Tell me, you snake! You've stirred up my heart."

"And what does your heart tell you?"

"I can't understand what it's saying," Grigory confessed.

"The man who tries to push me over the brink will get pushed over himself. We mustn't be afraid to turn our rifles against them. We must shoot the ones who're sending the people into hell." Garanzha rose in his bed and, grinding his teeth, stretched out his hand: "A great wave will rise and sweep them all away."

"So you think everything has to be turned upside down?"

"Yes! The government must be thrown aside like an old rag. The lords must be stripped of their fleece, for they've been murdering the people too long already."

They talked on until the dawn came. In the grey shadows Grigory fell into a troubled sleep.

It was evening of November the fourth when Grigory on his way from the station arrived at the first village in his own district. Yagodnoye was only a few versts distant. As he passed down the street children were singing a Cossack song under the river willows:

With shining swords the Cossacks ride....

He went on, walking through the damp, frosty grass at the side of the road. He spent the night in a little village, and set out again as soon as day was dawning. He reached Yagodnoye in the evening. Jumping across the fence, he went past the stables. The sound of Sashka's coughing arrested him.

"Grandad Sashka, you asleep?" he shouted.

"Wait, who is that? I know the voice. Who is it?"

Sashka came out, throwing his old coat around his shoulders. "Holy fathers...! Grisha! Where the devil have you come from?"

They embraced. Gazing up into Grigory's face,

Sashka said: "Come in and have a smoke."

"No, not now. I will tomorrow. I..."

"Come in, I tell you."

Grigory unwillingly followed him in, and sat down on the wooden bunk while the old man recovered from a fit of coughing.

"And how's Aksinya?"

"Aksinya? Praise be, she's all right."

The old man coughed violently. Grigory guessed it was a pretence to hide his embarrassment.

"I feel you're keeping something from me, like a stone under your coat. Strike!"

"And I will strike! I can't keep silent, Grisha, and silence would be shameful."

"Tell me, then," Grigory said, letting his hand drop caressingly on the old man's shoulder. He waited, bowing his back.

"You've been nursing a snake," Sashka suddenly exclaimed in a harsh, shrill voice. "You've been feeding a serpent. She's been playing about with Yevgeny."

A stream of sticky spittle ran down over the old man's scarred chin. He wiped it away and dried his hand on his trousers.

"Are you telling the truth?"

"I've seen them with my own eyes. Every night he goes to her. I expect he's with her now."

Grigory took a couple of pulls at the cigarette, then stubbed it out with his fingers. He went out without a word. He stopped by the window of the servants' quarters, panting heavily, and raised his hand several times to knock. But each time his hand fell as though struck away. When at last he did knock he tapped at first with his finger; but then, losing patience, he threw himself against the wall and beat at the window furiously with his fist. The frame rang with the blows, and the blue, nocturnal light shimmered on the pane.

Aksinya's frightened face appeared at the window for an instant, then she opened the door and gave a little scream. He embraced her, peering into her eyes.

"You knocked so hard you terrified me. I wasn't expecting you. My dear...."

"I'm frozen."

Aksinya felt his big body shivering violently although his hands were feverishly hot. She fussed about unnecessarily, lighted the lamp and ran about the room, a downy shawl around her plump, white shoulders. Finally she lit a fire in the stove.

"I wasn't expecting you. It's so long since you wrote. I thought you'd never come. Did you get my last letter? I was going to send you a parcel, but then I thought I'd wait to see if I received a letter...."

She cast sidelong glances at Grigory, her red lips frozen in a smile.

Grigory sat down on the bench without taking off his greatcoat. His unshaven cheeks burned, and his lowered eyes were heavily shadowed by the cowl of his coat. He began to unfasten the cowl, but suddenly turned to fidget with his tobacco pouch, and searched his pockets for paper. With measureless yearning he ran his eyes over Aksinya's face.

She had devilishly improved during his absence, he thought. Her beautiful head was carried with a new, authoritative poise, and only her eyes and the large, fluffy ringlets of her hair were the same. But her destructive, fiery beauty did not belong to him. How could it, when she was the mistress of the master's son!

"You don't look like a housemaid, you're more like a housekeeper."

She gave him a startled look, and laughed forcedly.

Dragging his pack behind him, Grigory went towards the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To have a smoke."

"I've fried you some eggs."

"I won't be long."

"Sit down and I'll pull your boots off, Grisha."

With white hands long divorced from hard work she struggled with Grigory's heavy army boots. Falling at his knees, she wept long and silently. Grigory let her weep to her heart's content, then asked:

"What's the matter? Aren't you glad to see me?"

In bed, he quickly fell asleep. Aksinya went out to

the steps in only her shift. She stood there in the cold, piercing wind, with her arms round the damp pillar, listening to the funeral dirge of the northern blast, and did not change her position until dawn came.

In the morning Grigory threw his greatcoat across his shoulders and went to the house. The old master was standing on the steps, dressed in a fur jacket and a yellow Astrakhan cap.

"Why, there he is, the Cavalier of St. George! But you're a man, my friend!" He saluted Grigory and stretched out his hand.

"Staying long?"

"Two weeks, Your Excellency."

"We buried your daughter. A pity . . . a pity. . ."

Grigory was silent. Yevgeny came on to the steps, drawing on his gloves.

"Why, it's Grigory. Where have you arrived from?"

Grigory's eyes darkened, but he smiled.

"Back on leave from Moscow."

"You were wounded in the eye, weren't you? I heard about it. What a fine lad he's grown, hasn't he, Papa?"

He nodded to Grigory and turned towards the stables, calling to the coachman:

"The horse, Nikitich!"

With a dignified air Nikitich finished harnessing the horse and, giving Grigory an unfriendly look, led the old grey trotting horse to the steps. The frost-bound earth rustled under the wheels of the light drozhki.

"Your Honour, let me drive you for the sake of old times," Grigory turned to Yevgeny with an ingratiating smile.

"The poor chap doesn't guess," Yevgeny thought, smiling with satisfaction, and his eyes glittered behind his pince-nez.

"All right, jump up."

"What, hardly arrived and you've already leaving your young wife? Didn't you miss her?" Old Listnitsky smiled benevolently.

Grigory laughed. "A wife isn't a bear. She won't

run off into the forest."

He mounted the driver's seat, thrust the knout under it and gathered up the reins.

"Ah, I'll give you a drive, Yevgeny Nikolayevich!"

"Drive well and I'll stand you a tip."

"Haven't I already got enough to be thankful for... I'm grateful to you for feeding ... my Aksinya ... for giving her ... a piece...."

Grigory's voice suddenly broke, and a vague, unpleasant suspicion troubled the lieutenant. "Surely he doesn't know? Of course not! How could he?" He leaned back in his seat and lit a cigarette:

"Don't be long," old Listnitsky called after them.

Needle-sharp snow dust flew from under the wheels.

Grigory pulled with the reins at the horse's mouth and urged it to its topmost speed. Within fifteen minutes they had crossed the rise, and the house was out of sight. In the very first dell they came to, Grigory jumped down and pulled the knout from under the seat.

"What's the matter?" the lieutenant frowned.

"I'll show you!"

Grigory swang the knout and brought it down with terrible force across the lieutenant's face. Then, seizing it by the lash, he beat the officer with the butt on the face and arms, giving him no time to get up. A fragment of the glass from his pince-nez cut Listnitsky above the brow, and a little stream of blood flowed into his eyes. At first he covered his face with his hands, but the blows grew more frequent. He jumped up, his face disfigured with blood and fury, and attempted to defend himself; but Grigory fell back and paralyzed his arm with a blow on the wrist.

"That's for Aksinya! That's for me! For Aksinya! Another for Aksinya! For me!"

The knout whistled, the blows slapped softly. At last Grigory threw Yevgeny down on the hard ruts of the road and rolled him on the ground, kicking him savagely with the iron-shod heels of his boots. When he had no strength to do more he got on to the drozhki seat, and sawing at the horse's mouth, galloped it back. He left the drozhki by the gate, and, seizing the knout,

stumbling over the flaps of his open greatcoat, he rushed into the servants' quarters.

As the door crashed open, Aksinya glanced round.

"You snake! You bitch!" the knout whistled and curled around her face.

Gasping for breath, Grigory ran into the yard, and heedless of Sashka's questionings, left the estate. When he had covered a verst he was overtaken by Aksinya. Panting violently, she walked along silently at his side, occasionally pulling at his sleeve. At a fork in the road, by a brown wayside cross, she said in a strange, distant voice:

"Grisha, forgive me!"

He bared his teeth, and hunching his shoulders turned up the collar of his greatcoat. Aksinya was left standing by the cross. He did not look back once, and did not see her hand stretched out to him.

At the crest of the hill above Tatarsky he noticed in astonishment that he was still carrying the knout; he threw it away, then strode down into the village. Faces were pressed against the windows, amazed to see him, and the women he met bowed low as he passed.

At the gate of his own yard a slim, black-eyed beauty ran to meet him, flung her arms around his neck and buried her face on his breast. Pressing her cheeks with his hands, he raised her head and recognized Dunya.

Pantelei Prokofyevich limped down the steps, and Grigory heard his mother start weeping aloud in the house. With his left hand he embraced his father; Dunya was kissing his right hand.

The almost painfully familiar creak of the steps, and Grigory was in the porch. His ageing mother ran to him light-footed as a girl, wetted the lapels of his greatcoat with her tears, and embraced her son closely, muttering something disconnected in her own mother-language that could not be put into words; while by the door, clinging to it to save herself from falling, stood Natalya, a tortured smile on her pale face. Cut down by Grigory's hurried, distracted glance, she dropped to the floor.

That night in bed, Pantelei gave his wife a dig in the

ribs and whispered:

"Go quietly and see whether they're lying together or not."

"I made up their bed on the bedstead."

"But go on and look, look!"

Ilyinichna got up and peeped through a crack in the door leading to the best room.

"They're together."

"Well, God be praised! God be praised!" the old man whimpered, raising himself on his elbow and crossing himself.

The sergeant-major came into Listnitsky's dug-out with a worried look on his face, and after much humming and hawing, informed him:

"This morning, Your Honour, the Cossacks found these papers in the trenches. It's a bit awkward.... And I thought it best to report to you...."

"What papers?" Listnitsky asked, rising from his bunk.

The sergeant-major handed him some crumpled type-written leaflets. Listnitsky read:

WORKERS OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE !

Comrade Soldiers,

Two years this accursed war has lasted. Two years you have rotted in the trenches, defending other men's interests. Two years the blood of the workers and peasants of all nations has been poured out. Hundreds of thousands of killed and wounded, hundreds of thousands of widows and orphans: these are the results of this slaughter. What are you fighting for? Whose interests are you defending? The tsarist government has sent millions of soldiers into the firing line in order to seize new lands, and to oppress the peoples of those lands as it already oppresses enslaved Poland and other nationalities. The world industrialists will not share the markets where they could dispose of the output of their plants and factories, will not share the profits; instead they are dividing the markets by armed force, and you, ignorant people, in the struggle for their interests, are going to your death, and are killing toiling men like yourselves.

Enough of shedding your brothers' blood! Awake, toilers ! Your enemy is not the Austrian and German soldiers, just as deluded as you, but your own tsar, your own industrialist and landowner. Turn your rifles against them. Fraternize with the German and Austrian soldiers. Across the wire entangle-

ments which separate you as though you were animals stretch out your hands to one another. You are brothers in labour, the bloody calluses of toil are still on your hands; you have nothing to divide. Down with the autocracy! Down with imperialist war! Hurrah for the unity of the toilers of the whole world!

Listnitsky read the leaflet with rising anger. "Now it's begun!" he thought, gripped by a senseless hatred and overwhelmed with his presentiments. He at once communicated the discovery by telephone to the regimental commander.

"What are your instructions in the matter, Your Excellency?" he asked.

"Take the sergeant-major and the troop officers and carry out an extensive search at once. Search everybody, not excluding the officers. I'll ask the divisional staff today when they propose to relieve the regiment. I'll hurry them up. If you find anything in the course of the search inform me at once."

"I think it's the work of the machine-gunners."

"You do? I'll order the commander at once to search his Cossacks."

Assembling the troop officers in his dug-out, Listnitsky informed them of the regimental commander's order.

"How monstrous!" Merkulov exclaimed indignantly. "Are we to search one another?"

"Your turn first, Listnitsky," a young lieutenant remarked.

"No, we'll throw dice for it."

"Alphabetically."

"Joking aside, gentlemen," Listnitsky interrupted. "The old man has gone too far, of course; the officers in our regiment are as pure as Caesar's wife. There was only Cornet Bunchuk, and he's deserted. But we must search the Cossacks. Someone fetch the sergeant-major."

The sergeant-major, an elderly Cossack with three Crosses of St. George, entered. He coughed and glanced from one to another of the officers.

"Who are the suspicious characters in the company? Who do you think could have left these leaflets about?"

Yevgeny demanded.

"There are none in our company, Your Excellency," the man replied confidently.

"But the leaflets were found in our sector. Have any men from another company been in our trenches?"

"No, sir."

"We'll go and search every man," Merkulov waved his hand and turned towards the door.

The search began. The Cossacks' faces expressed every shade of feeling. Some frowned in amazement, others looked at the officers in alarm, yet others laughed as the officers rummaged in their miserable belongings.

"What are you looking for? Has something been stolen? Perhaps we've seen it somewhere," a smart-looking sergeant remarked.

The search yielded almost no results. Only one Cossack had a crumpled copy of the leaflet in his great-coat pocket.

"Have you read this?" Merkulov demanded.

"I picked it up for a smoke," the Cossack smiled without raising his downcast eyes.

"What are you grinning at?" Listnitsky shouted furiously, turning livid and striding towards the man. His short golden eye-lashes blinked nervously under his pince-nez.

The Cossack's face became serious, and the smile vanished as though swept away by the wind.

"Excuse me, Your Honour. I can hardly read. I picked it up because I have no paper for cigarettes, and I saw this lying about, so I picked it up." The man spoke in a loud, aggrieved, almost angry tone.

Listnitsky spat and turned away, the other officers trailing after him.

While the Cossacks were resting by the dugouts, the First Battalion of the Chernoyarsk Regiment went on ahead. They reached the bridge over the river Stokhod. It was guarded by a strong machine-gun section from the grenadiers. The sergeant-major explained the situation to the battalion commander and the battalion split up into companies after crossing the bridge: two

companies moved off to the right, one to the left, and the fourth remained in reserve. The companies advanced in extended line. The dense forest was heavily holed with shells. The men trod cautiously, feeling the path with their feet; occasionally someone would fall and curse under his breath. Knave was in the company on the extreme right, and was sixth from the end of the long file.

They went on in silence, setting their water-logged boots cautiously down on the slippery earth. Suddenly, a horned and spotted moon broke from behind the clouds, breasting the misty waves like a boat; emerging into clear sky, it poured down a flood of uncertain light. The damp pine needles gleamed phosphorescently in its light, and the cones seemed to smell more strongly and the wet soil to breathe a sharper cold.

Knave glanced at his neighbour, who had stopped suddenly and was shaking his head as if from a blow.

"Look!" he breathed.

Three paces away from them under a pinetree, his legs planted wide apart, stood a man.

"A man!" It was Knave who muttered the words or, at least, thought he did.

"Who's there?" his companion shouted, suddenly flinging his rifle to his shoulder. "Who's there? I'll fire!"

The figure under the pine was silent. His head hung sideways, like a sunflower on its stalk.

"He's asleep!" Knave shuddered and, forcing himself to laugh, stepped forward.

They went up to the standing figure. Knave stretched up and stared. His companion poked the motionless grey figure with his rifle-butt.

"Hey, you, dopey! Having a sleep, mate?" he said mockingly. "Hey, dopey!" His voice broke off. "A corpse!" he cried, backing away.

His teeth chattering, Knave jumped back and the next moment the figure collapsed like a fallen tree on the spot where he had been standing. They turned the body face upwards and only then did they realize that the pine-tree had provided a last refuge for this gas-

poisoned soldier of the 256th Regiment in his desperate flight from the death which he carried in his lungs. A tall, broad-shouldered fellow, he lay with his head thrown back, his face smeared with mud from his fall, the eyes pulpy and eaten away by gas; a swollen fleshy tongue stuck out between his teeth like a black lump of wood.

"Come on, for God's sake! Let him lie there!" Knave's companion whispered, grabbing his arm.

In a few paces more they came across another corpse, then another and another. In places the gassed soldiers lay in heaps; some had died sitting on their haunches, some were on all fours, like grazing animals, and at the entrance to the communication trench leading to the second line of trenches a man lay twisted into a ball, his gnawed fist thrust between his teeth in agony.

Knave and his companion ran to catch up with their file. But in the darkness they missed them and somehow got in front. After wandering on for some time they jumped down into a dark cleft of trenches zigzagging off into the darkness.

"Let's search the dug-outs. We may find something to eat," Knave's comrade proposed irresolutely.

"All right."

"You go to the right, I'll take the left. We'll search while the others are coming up."

Knave struck a match and stepped through the open doorway of the first dug-out he found. But he flew out again as though propelled by a catapult; inside, two corpses lay crossed one on the other. He searched three dug-outs fruitlessly, and flung open the door of a fourth, all but collapsing as he heard a strange metallic voice speaking German:

"Who's that?"

His body tingling, Knave silently jumped back.

"Is that you, Otto? Why have you been so long?" the German asked, stepping out of the dug-out and carelessly adjusting his greatcoat across his shoulders.

"Hands up! Put 'em up! Surrender!" Knave shouted hoarsely, holding his rifle at the ready.

Mute with astonishment, the German slowly raised

his hands, turned sideways, and stared fixedly at the gleaming point of the bayonet presented at him. His greatcoat fell from his shoulders, revealing his greyish-green tunic rumpled under the armpits, his big, work-scarred hands trembled above his head, and the fingers stirred as though touching invisible keys. Knave stood without changing his position, gazing at the tall, stalwart form of the German, the metal buttons of his tunic, the short boots and the peakless cap set slightly on one side. Suddenly changing his attitude, he swayed as though being shaken out of his greatcoat, emitted a curt, throaty sound, neither cough nor wheeze, and stepped towards the German.

"Run!" he said in a hollow, broken voice. "Run, German! I've got no grudge against you! I won't shoot!"

He leaned his rifle against the wall of the trench, and rising on tiptoe, stretched his hand up to the right hand of the German. His confident movements reassured the man, who dropped his hand and listened intently to the unfamiliar intonation of the Russian voice.

Without hesitation Knave gave him his own calloused labour-worn hand, and squeezed the German's cold, limp fingers. Then he lifted the palm. The light of the moon fell on it and revealed the brown calluses.

"I'm a worker," Knave said, trembling as though he had the ague. "What should I kill you for? Run!" He gently pushed the German's shoulder and pointed to the black outline of the forest. "Run, you fool! Our men will be here soon...."

The German stood staring at Knave's outflung hand, his body a little forward, his ears straining to catch the sense of the incomprehensible words. So he stood for a second or two, his eyes meeting Knave's, then suddenly a joyous smile quivered on his lips. Stepping backwards a pace he threw out his arms, squeezed Knave's hands, and shook them, smiling agitatedly and staring into the Russian's eyes.

"You're letting me go? Oh, now I understand.... You're a Russian worker? A Social-Democrat like me?"

Yes...? It's like a dream. My brother, how can I ever forget...? I can't find words.... But you're a fine brave lad...."

Amid the boiling torrent of foreign words Knave caught the one familiar "Social-Democrat."

"Yes, I'm a Social-Democrat. You've guessed right. And now, run...! Good-bye brother. Give me your hand."

Instinctively understanding each other, they stood looking into each other's eyes, the tall, well-knit Bavarian and the small Russian soldier. From the forest came the sounds of the approaching file of Russians. The German whispered:

"In the coming class struggle we'll be in the same trenches, won't we, Comrade?" Then he leapt like a grey animal on to the breastwork.

Across the sky, furrowed with a grey ripple of cloud, the autumn sun rolled over Tatarsky. High up a gentle breeze urged the clouds slowly on towards the west; but over the village, over the dark-green plain of the Don valley, over the bare forest it blew strongly, bending the crowns of the willows and poplars, ruffling the Don, and chasing droves of crimson leaves along the streets. On Christonya's threshing-floor it tousled a badly stacked hayrick, tearing away its top and sending the thin ridge-pole flying. Suddenly snatching up a golden load of hay as if on a pitchfork, it carried the burden out into the yard, sent it whirling across the street, and scattered it munificently over the deserted road, finally throwing the untidy bundle on to the roof of Stepan Astakhov's house. Christonya's wife ran out into the yard without her shawl and stood for a minute or two watching the wind lording it about the threshing floor, then went in again.

Three years of the war had left noticeable marks in the village. Where the houses had been deprived of all male hands the sheds gaped wide open, the yards were shabby, and gradual decay was leaving its traces everywhere.

Stepan Astakhov's house was completely abandoned;

the owner had boarded up the windows, the roof was falling in and was overgrown with burdocks, the door lock was rusting, and wandering cattle strayed through the open gate, seeking shelter from the heat or rain in the weedy grass-grown yard. The wall of Ivan Tomilin's house was falling into the street, being kept from doing so only by a forked wooden prop. Fate seemed to be wreaking its vengeance on the hardy artilleryman for the German and Russian houses he had destroyed.

And so it was in all the streets and alleys of the village. At the lower end only Pantelei Melekhov's house and yard retained their usual appearance; there everything seemed sound and in order, yet it was not entirely so. The iron cocks had fallen from the granary roof, eaten away with age; the granary was sinking on one side; and an experienced eye would have detected other signs of neglect. The old man could not manage everything. He sowed less and less, and only the Melekhov family itself did not diminish. To make up for Pyotr's and Grigory's absence, Natalya gave birth to twins in the autumn of 1915. She was clever enough to please both Pantelei and Ilyinichna by having a girl and a boy. Natalya's pregnancy was a difficult one; there were whole days when she could hardly walk, owing to the tormenting pains in her legs, and tottered about dragging her feet one behind the other. But she bore the pain stoically, and it never found any reflection in her swarthy, lean and happy face. Only by the beads of perspiration that stood out on her temples when the pain was more intense could Ilyinichna guess at her suffering, and tell her to go and lie down.

One fine September day Natalya, feeling her time near at hand, turned to go out into the street.

"Where are you off to?" Ilyinichna asked her.

"Into the meadow. I'll see the cows out."

Groaning and holding her hands under her belly, she walked out hurriedly beyond the village, made her way into a thicket of wild thorn, and lay down. Dusk was falling when she returned by back ways to the house, carrying twins in her canvas apron.

"My dear! You little wretch! What's all this!

And where have you been?" Ilyinichna exclaimed when she eventually found her voice.

"I was ashamed, so I went out. . . . I didn't like to . . . in front of Father. . . . I'm clean, Mother, and I've washed them. Take them. . . ." Natalya replied, turning pale.

Dunya ran for the midwife, and Darya busied herself lining a sieve. Ilyinichna, laughing and weeping for joy, shouted at her:

"Darya, put that sieve down. Are they kittens, that you want to put them in a sieve? Lord, there's two of them! Oh Lord, one's a boy! Natalya, dear. . . . Make up the bed for her!"

When Pantelei heard that his daughter-in-law had given birth to twins he opened wide his arms in astonishment, then wept happily and tugged at his beard. For no apparent reason he shouted at the approaching midwife:

"No, you old croaker!" He shook his fist in front of the old woman's nose. "You're a liar! The Melekhov line won't die out so soon! My daughter-in-law's got a Cossack and a girl. There's a daughter-in-law for you! Lord, my God! For such kindness how can I repay her?"

Fruitful was that year; the cow gave birth to twins, the sheep had twins, the goats. . . . Astonished at the circumstances, Pantelei reasoned to himself:

"A lucky year this, and fruity too! Everything having twins! What a yield we're getting, oho!"

During these years life slowly began to ebb, like flood water in the Don. The days were dreary and exhausting and slipped by, in continual bustling, in work, in petty needs, in little joys and a great, unsleeping anxiety for those who were at the war. Rare letters in greasy envelopes plastered with postmarks arrived from Pyotr and Grigory. Grigory's last letter had fallen into someone else's hands; half of it was carefully obliterated with violet ink, and an incomprehensible sign had been made in ink in the margin of the grey paper. Pyotr wrote more frequently than Grigory, and in his letters to Darya he threatened and adjured her to give

up her goings on. Evidently rumours of his wife's unseemly life had reached his ears. With his letters Grigory sent home money, his pay and allowances for his crosses, and promised to come home on leave, but did not come. The two brothers' roads ran in very different directions. Grigory was oppressed by the war, and the flush was sucked out of his face, leaving a yellow jaundice. He could not wait for the war to end. But Pyotr climbed swiftly and easily upward; he wormed his way into the good graces of his squadron commander, was awarded two crosses, in the autumn of 1916 was made a sergeant-major, and he was now talking in his letters of attempting to get himself sent to an officers' school. During the summer he sent home a German officer's helmet and cloak, and his own photograph. His face staring complacently from the grey card looked older, his flaxen moustache twisted up at the tips, and under the snub nose the well-known grin parted his firm lips. Life was smiling on Pyotr, and the war delighted him because it opened up unusual prospects. But for its coming how could he, a simple Cossack, ever have dreamed of an officer's commission, and a different, sweeter life? Only in one respect did Pyotr's life have an unpleasant future; ugly rumours concerning his wife circulated in the village. Stepan Astakhov was given leave in the autumn of 1916, and on his return to the regiment boasted throughout the squadron of the splendid time he had had with Pyotr's wife. Pyotr would not believe the stories; his face went dark, but he smiled and said:

"Stepan's a liar! He's trying to gall me because of what Grisha did."

But one day, as Stepan was coming out of his dug-out, whether by accident or design he dropped an embroidered lace handkerchief. Pyotr, who was just behind him, picked it up, and at once recognized his wife's handiwork. Again the old hostility broke out between them. Pyotr watched for his opportunity; death watched over Stepan. If Pyotr could, he would have had Stepan lying on the bank of the Dvina with his mark on Stepan's skull. But before long it happened

that Stepan went out on patrol to capture a German outpost, and did not come back. The Cossacks who went with him said one of the Germans had heard them cutting the barbed wire, and flung a grenade. The Cossacks managed to get up to him and Stepan knocked him down with his fist, but a supporting guard opened fire, and Stepan fell. The Cossacks bayoneted the second guard, dragged away the German stunned by Stepan's blow, and attempted to pick Stepan up also. But he was too heavy and they had to leave him. Stepan pleaded: "Brothers, don't leave me to die! Comrades! What are you leaving me for?" But a hail of machine-gun bullets spattered through the wire, and the Cossacks crawled away. "Brothers!" Stepan called after them, but what of that? Your own skin has to be saved before another's. When Pyotr heard of Stepan's fate he felt relieved, as if he had smeared a painful sore with dripping, but he resolved nonetheless that when he got leave he would have Darya's blood. He wasn't Stepan! He wouldn't stand for that! He thought of killing her, but at once rejected the idea. "Kill the bitch, and ruin all my life because of her? Rot in a prison, lose all I've been working for, lose everything?" He decided merely to beat her, but in a way that would cure her of all desire ever to raise her tail again! "I'll knock her eye out, the snake, then nobody will look at her!" he thought as he sat in the trenches not far from the steep, clayey bank of the Dvina river.

That autumn Darya made up for all her hungry, husbandless life. One morning Pantelei Prokofyevich awoke as usual before the rest of the family, and went out into the yard. He clutched his head, overcome by what he saw. The gates had been removed from their hinges and had been flung down in the middle of the road. It was an insult, a disgrace! The old man immediately put the gates back in their place, and after breakfast called Darya outside into the summer kitchen. What they talked about was never known to the others, but a few minutes later Dunya saw Darya run dishevelled and crying out of the kitchen, her kerchief awry.

As she passed Dunya she swung her shoulders, and the black arches of her eyebrows quivered in her tear-stained, angry face.

"You wait, you old devil! I'll pay you out for this!" she hissed between her swollen lips.

Dunya saw that her blouse was torn at the back, and a fresh livid weal showed on her bare shoulders. She ran up the steps and whisked into the house, while Pantelei came limping from the summer kitchen, as angry as the devil, and looping up some new leather reins as he walked. Dunya heard her father say: "I ought to have given it you harder, you bitch! You whore!"

Order was restored in the house. For some days Darya crept about quieter than water, humbler than grass, went to bed before anybody else each night, and smiled coldly at Natalya's sympathetic glances, shrugging her shoulders and raising her eyebrows as though saying: "All right, we'll see!" On the fourth day, an incident occurred of which only Darya and old Pantelei knew. Afterwards Darya went about laughing triumphantly, but the old man was embarrassed for a whole week, and as miserable as a guilty cat. He did not tell his wife what had occurred, and even at confession kept the incident and his own sinful thoughts about it a secret from Father Vissarion.

What had happened was this. Pantelei was sure of Darya's complete conversion, and he told his wife Ilyinichna:

"Don't spare Darya! Make her work harder. She'll never go wrong at work, but the filly's getting too fat, all she thinks of is nights out."

He himself made Darya clean out the threshing-floor and stack fire-wood in the back yard, and helped her to clear the chaff-shed. Later the same afternoon he thought he would shift the winnowing machine from the barn into the chaff-shed, and called his daughter-in-law to help him.

Adjusting her kerchief and shaking off the chaff which had worked under the collar of her jacket, Darya came out and passed through the threshing-floor into

the barn. Pantelei, in a padded woollen work-a-day coat and ragged trousers, went in front. The yard was empty. Dunya was helping her mother spin the autumn's wool, and Natalya was setting the dough for the morrow's bread. The evening sunset was glowing beyond the village. The bell was ringing for vespers. A little raspberry-coloured cloud hung motionless in the zenith of the translucent sky, the rooks clung like black charred flakes to the bare grey branches of the poplars beyond the Don. In the empty stillness of the evening every sound was sharp and distinct. The heavy scent of steaming dung and hay came from the cattle-yard. Pantelei and Darya carried the faded red winnowing machine into the chaff-shed, and set it down in a corner. He raked away some fallen chaff and turned to go out.

"Father!" Darya called in a low whisper.

He went back to the winnowing machine, asking: "What's the matter?"

Darya stood facing him with her blouse unbuttoned, her arms were thrown back adjusting her hair. From a chink in the wall a crimson ray of the setting sun fell on her neck.

"Here, Father, here's something. . . . Come and look," she said, bending sideways and stealthily glancing across the old man's shoulder at the open door. He went right up to her. Suddenly she flung out her arms, and clasping him round the neck, her fingers interlocking, she stepped back, dragging him after her and whispering:

"Here, Father. . . . Here. . . . It's softer. . . ."

"What's the matter with you?" Pantelei asked in alarm. Wriggling his head from side to side, he tried to free himself from her arms; but she drew his head more strongly towards her own face, breathing hotly in his beard and laughing and whispering.

"Let me go, you bitch!" the old man struggled, feeling his daughter-in-law's straining belly right against him. Pressing still closer, she fell backward and drew him down on top of herself.

"The devil! She's gone silly! Let me go!"

"Don't you want to?" Darya panted. Unlocking her arms, she shoved the old man in the chest. "Or

perhaps you can't? Then don't judge me! Do you hear?"

Jumping to her feet, she hurriedly adjusted her skirt, brushed the chaff off her back and shouted into the frenzied old man's face:

"What did you beat me for the other day? Am I an old woman? Weren't you the same when you were young? My husband! I haven't seen him for a year! And what am I to do . . . lie with a dog? A fig for you, one leg! Here, take this!" She made an indecent gesture, and, her eyebrows working, went towards the door. At the door she once more carefully examined her clothes, brushed the dust from her jacket and kerchief, and said without looking back at Pantelei:

"I can't do without it. I need a Cossack, and if you don't want to . . . I'll find one for myself, and you keep your mouth shut!"

With her hips swinging she went quickly to the door of the threshing-floor and disappeared without a glance back, while Pantelei remained standing by the winnowing machine, chewing his beard and staring guiltily and disconcertedly around the chaff-shed. "Perhaps she's right after all? Maybe I should have sinned with her?" he thought in perplexity, flabbergasted at what had happened to him.

At the beginning of November rumours of the upheaval in Petrograd began to reach the Cossack troops. The staff orderlies, who were usually better informed than the others, confirmed that the Provisional Government had fled to America; Kerensky, they said, had been captured by sailors, who had shaven him absolutely bare, tarred him like a prostitute, and dragged him for two days through the streets of Petrograd.

Later, when the official news arrived of the overthrow of the Provisional Government and the transfer of power to the Bolsheviks, the Cossacks became guardedly quiet. Many were glad, in the expectation that the war would be ended. But rumours that the Third Cavalry Corps was marching with Kerensky and General Krasnov on Petrograd, and that Kaledin was advancing

with Cossack regiments from the south, instilled alarm.

The front crumbled to pieces. In October the soldiers had deserted in scattered, unorganized groups; but by the end of November entire companies and regiments were retiring from their positions, sometimes marching with only light equipment, but more frequently taking the regimental property with them, breaking into the warehouses, shooting their officers, pillaging en route, and pouring in an unfettered, stormy flood back to their homes.

In the new circumstances the Twelfth Regiment's task of holding up deserters became senseless. After being flung back into the front in the useless attempt to close the gaps and breaches formed by the infantry abandoning their sectors, it was in December again withdrawn, marched to the nearest station, and loading all the regimental property, machineguns, reserves of ammunition, and horses into wagons, set off into the heart of struggle-racked Russia.

Through the Ukraine the troop trains of the Twelfth Regiment dragged towards the Don. Not far from Znamenka the Bolshevik Red Guards tried to disarm them. The negotiations lasted half an hour. Koshevoi and five other Cossacks, the chairmen of the squadron revolutionary committees, asked for permission to pass through with their arms.

"What do you want the arms for?" the members of the station Soviet asked.

"To smash our own bourgeoisie and generals with! To twist Kaledin's tail!" Koshevoi answered for them all.

"We won't give up our weapons, they're the Army's," the Cossacks protested.

The trains were allowed to go on. At Kremenchug a further attempt was made to disarm them. They were allowed to pass only when the Cossack machine-gunners set up their guns at the open doors of the wagons and trained them on the station, while one of the squadrons spread out along the lines and made ready to fight. Near Yekaterinoslav not even an exchange of shots with a Red Guard detachment availed; the regiment was

partly disarmed, and the machine-guns, more than a hundred cases of cartridges, the field telephone apparatus and several reels of wire were confiscated. To the proposal that they should arrest their officers the Cossacks replied with a refusal. Throughout the journey they lost only one officer, the regimental adjutant; and he was sentenced to death by the Cossacks themselves, the sentence being carried out by Uryupin and a Red Guard sailor.

Towards evening on December 17th, at the station of Sinelnikovo, the Cossacks dragged the adjutant out of the train.

"Is that the one who gave the Cossacks away?" the gap-toothed sailor, armed with a Mauser pistol and a Japanese rifle, asked cheerfully.

"Think we don't know his face? This is him all right!" Uryupin answered panting.

The adjutant, a young junior captain, stared round like a trapped animal, unconscious of the cold that seared his cheeks or the pain of the blow he had received from a rifle-butt. Uryupin and the sailor led him a little away from the train.

"It's devils like him make people rebel, he's the kind that's caused this revolution. . . . Oho, don't shake so much, dearie, or you'll fall apart," Uryupin hissed, and taking off his cap, made the sign of the cross.

"Look out, Captain!"

"Ready?" the sailor asked, toying with his pistol, his lips parted in a broad toothless grin.

"I am."

Uryupin crossed himself once again, glanced sideways at the sailor who had put one foot back and was taking aim, and with a grim smile fired first.

The Cossacks began to come home from the front in the late autumn of 1917. It was they who brought the news that Grigory Melekhov, who had recently been serving in the Second Reserve Regiment, had gone over to the Bolsheviks and remained in Kamenskaya.

For Stepan Astakhov did no one weep; for there was no one. His boarded-up house, tumble-down

and gloomy even in summer-time, was left empty. Aksinya lived in Yagodnoye, and little was heard of her; she never set foot in the village, and perhaps she never wanted to.

The Cossacks of the upper districts of the Don returned home in groups. By December almost all had returned to the villages of Vyeshenskaya District. Day and night the bands of riders passed through Tatarsky in groups of from ten to forty, making their way to the left bank of the Don.

"Where are you from, soldiers?" the old men would go out and ask.

"From Chornaya River; from Zimovnaya; from Dubrovka; from Gorokhovskaya," would come the replies.

"Finished fighting, then?" old men would ask slyly.

Some of the riders, the quiet ones with tender consciences, would smile:

"We've had enough, Dad! We're finished!"

But the more desperate and embittered would curse and advise the old men: "Go and try it yourselves! Why all the questions? There are too many of you busybodies about."

By the end of the winter civil war had broken out close to Novocherkassk, but in the villages in the upper districts of the Don a graveyard silence reigned. Only an internal, hidden dissension raged in the houses, and sometimes broke through to the surface. The old men could not get on with the Cossacks returned from the front.

Of the war which had flared up near the capital of the Don Province the villagers knew only by hearsay. Only hazily understanding the various political tendencies that had arisen, they kept their ears to the ground and waited.

Until January life flowed on peacefully in the village of Tatarsky. The Cossacks who had returned from the front rested at home with their wives and ate their fill, little reckoning that still more bitter woes and burdens than those they had had to bear during the war lurked at the threshold of their homes.

In January 1917 Grigory Melekhov was promoted to cornet's rank in recognition of his distinguished services in the field, and was appointed to the Second Reserve Regiment as a troop commander. In the following September he went home on leave, after an attack of pneumonia. He spent six weeks at home, then was passed as fit by the district medical commission and returned to his regiment. After the October Revolution he was promoted to the rank of squadron commander. About this time his opinions underwent a considerable change, as the result of the events occurring around him and the influence of one of the officers in the regiment, Lieutenant Yefim Izvarin.

A man of unusual ability, highly talented, educated considerably above the level of the average Cossack officer, Izvarin was a fervent Cossack autonomist. The February Revolution afforded him opportunities for development, he associated with Cossack separationist circles, and carried on intelligent agitation for the complete autonomy of the Don Region and the establishment of the form of government which had existed on the Don before tsarism had laid hands on the Cossacks. He was well acquainted with history, was ardent yet clear-sighted and sober in intellect, and with compelling eloquence painted a picture of the future free life of the Don Cossacks when they would have their own government, when there would not be a Russian left in the province, and the Cossackry, setting guards along their own frontiers, would talk as equals, without any cap-raising, with the Ukraine and Great Russia, and carry on commerce and exchange with them. Izvarin turned the heads of the simple-minded Cossacks and the poorly educated officers, and Grigory also fell under his spell. At first, heated arguments went on between them, but the semi-literate Grigory was no match for his opponent, and Izvarin easily triumphed in the verbal duels. The discussion usually took place in some corner of the barracks, and the listeners were always on Izvarin's side. He carried the Cossacks away with his arguments and the pictures he drew of the future independent life, which particularly appealed to the innermost, deeply

cherished feelings of the prosperous Cossacks of the lower Don.

Izvarin and Grigory had long talks together, and Grigory, feeling that the ground was once again quaking beneath his feet, passed through an experience similar to what he had felt in the Moscow eye hospital when he met Garanzha.

Shortly after the October Revolution he had a long conversation with Izvarin. Torn by contradictory impulses, he cautiously asked the lieutenant what he thought of the Bolsheviks.

"Tell me, Yefim Ivanich, do you think the Bolsheviks are right or not?"

Raising his eyebrow and humorously crinkling his nose, Izvarin replied:

"Are the Bolsheviks right? Ha-ha! My boy, you're like a new-born babe. The Bolsheviks have their own programme, their own plans and hopes. They're right from their point of view, and we're right from ours. Do you know the real name of the Bolshevik Party? No? Well, it's the 'Russian Social-Democratic *Labour* Party.' Understand? 'Labour'! Just now they're flirting with the peasantry and the Cossacks, but the working class is their basis. They're bringing emancipation to the workers, but perhaps even worse enslavement to the peasants. In real life it never works out that everybody gets an equal share. If the Bolsheviks get the upper hand it will be good for the workers and bad for the rest. If the monarchy returns, it will be good for the landowners and suchlike and bad for the rest. We don't want either the one or the other. We need our own, and first of all we need to get rid of all our protectors, whether Kornilov, or Kerensky, or Lenin. We can get along without them on our own land. God save us from our friends and we'll manage our enemies ourselves."

"But you know that most of the Cossacks are drawn towards the Bolsheviks?"

"Grisha, my friend, understand this, for it is fundamental. At the moment the roads of the peasants and the Cossacks coincide with that of the Bolsheviks.

That's true, but do you know why? It is because the Bolsheviks stand for peace, for an immediate peace, and at the moment this is where the Cossacks feel the war!" He gave himself a resounding slap on his swarthy neck, and straightening his quizzically lifted eyebrow, shouted:

"And that is why the Cossacks are reeking with Bolshevism and are marching in step with the Bolsheviks. But... as soon as the war is over and the Bolsheviks stretch out their hands to grab the Cossacks' possessions the roads of the Cossacks and the Bolsheviks will part. That is basic, and historically inevitable. Between the present order of Cossack existence and socialism, which is the final consummation of the Bolshevik Revolution, there is an impassable abyss! Well, what do you say to that?"

"I say that I don't understand anything!" Grigory mumbled. "It's hard for me to make head or tail of it. I'm as lost as if I were in a snowstorm in the steppe."

The town of Novocherkassk became the centre of attraction for all who had fled from the Bolshevik Revolution. Important generals who formerly had been arbiters of the destiny of the Russian armies poured down into the lower regions of the Don, hoping to find support among the reactionary Don Cossacks and to use the Don as a base for an offensive against Soviet Russia. On November 2nd General Alexeyev arrived in the town. After talks with Kaledin he set to work to organize volunteer detachments. The backbone of the future Volunteer Army was provided by officers, who had fled from the north, cadets, students, declassed soldiers, the most active of the counter-revolutionary Cossacks, and men seeking adventure and higher pay even in Kerensky rubles.

At the end of November, when Alexeyev had more than a thousand in his detachments, more generals arrived, and on December 6th Kornilov himself appeared in the town. By this time Kaledin had succeeded in withdrawing almost all the Cossack regiments from the Rumanian and Austro-German fronts, and had distributed them along the main railway lines of the Don

Province. But the Cossacks, wearied with three years of war and returning from the front in a revolutionary mood, showed no great desire to fight the Bolsheviks. The regiments were left with hardly a third of their normal complement, for the homefires beckoned powerfully, and there was no force on earth that could have restrained the Cossacks from their spontaneous movement towards their native villages. Only three of the Don regiments were in Petrograd and even they did not remain there long.

Some of the particularly unreliable units Kaledin attempted to reform, or to isolate by surrounding them with his staunchest troops. Towards the end of November, when Kaledin made his first attempt to send front-line detachments against revolutionary Rostov, the Cossacks refused to attack, and turned back after going only a short distance. But the widely developed organization for consolidating the fragmentary divisions began to have its results. By November 27th Kaledin had several reliable volunteer detachments at his command, and could borrow forces from Alexeyev, who by this time had collected a few battalions.

On December 2nd Rostov was stormed by White Guard volunteer forces. With Kornilov's arrival there the city became the organizational centre of the Volunteer Army. Kaledin was left alone. He scattered his Cossack units along the borders of the region as far as Tsaritsin and the fringe of the Saratov Province. For his most urgent tasks, however, he used officer-partisan detachments; only on them could the enfeebled Army government rely for everyday support.

Freshly recruited detachments were sent out to subdue the Donets miners. Captain Chernetsov got to work in the Makeyev District, where there were also units of the regular 58th Cossack Regiment. In Novocherkassk various detachments and fighting squads were formed; in the north, officers and partisans were lumped together in the so-called "Stenka Razin" detachment. But from three sides columns of Red Guards were approaching the province. In Kharkov and Voronezh, forces were being assembled to strike a blow

against the counter-revolutionaries on the Don. Clouds hung, and deepened, and blackened over the Don. The winds from the Ukraine were already bringing the rumble of gun-fire that accompanied the first clashes.

As Pyotr kissed his brother he glanced into Grigory's eyes.

"Are you well?"

"I've been wounded."

"Where?"

"Near Glubokaya."

"You needed something better to do! You should have come home long ago."

He gave Grigory a warm and friendly shake, and handed him on to Dunya. Grigory embraced his sister's ripened shoulders and kissed her on the lips and the eyes, then stepped back in astonishment.

"Why, Dunya, the devil himself wouldn't know you! Look at the girl you've turned out, and I thought you would be so plain and ugly."

"Now, now, Brother!" Dunya foiled his attempt to pinch her, and smiling the same white-toothed smile as Grigory, ran off.

Ilyinichna brought the children out in her arms, and Natalya ran in front of her. Grigory's wife had blossomed and improved astonishingly. Her smoothly combed, gleaming black hair, gathered in a heavy knot at the back, set off her joyfully flushed face. She cleaved to Grigory, brushed her lips awkwardly several times against his cheeks and whiskers, and snatching her son from Ilyinichna's arms, held him out to her husband.

"Look what a fine son you have!" she cried with happy pride.

"Let me have a look at *my* son!" Ilyinichna excitedly pushed her aside. She pulled down Grigory's head, kissed his brow, and stroked his face with her rough hand, weeping with excitement and joy.

"And your daughter, Grisha! Here, take her!"

Natalya set the girl in Grigory's other arm, and in his embarrassment he did not know whom to look at:

Natalya, or his mother, or his children. The little boy, with morose eyes and knitted brows, was cast in the Melekhov mould: the same long slits of black, rather sombre eyes, blue prominent whites, the spreading line of brows, and swarthy skin. He thrust his dirty little fist into his mouth and stared stubbornly and unyieldingly at his father. Grigory could see only the tiny, attentive black eyes of his daughter: the rest of her face was wrapped in a shawl.

Grigory took off his sheepskin and greatcoat and hung them at the foot of the bed, then combed his hair. He sat down on a bench and called his son:

"Come to me, Misha! Why, don't you know me?"

His fist still in his mouth, the child edged towards him, but came to a halt by the table. His mother gazed fondly and proudly at him from the stove. She bent down and whispered something into her daughter's ear, and gently pushed her forward.

"Go on!"

Grigory gathered them both up, set them on his knees and asked:

"Don't you know me, you wood nuts? Polya, don't you know your daddy?"

"You're not our daddy," the boy said, feeling more confident now that his sister was with him.

"Then who am I?"

"You're some other Cossack."

"And that's that!" Grigory laughed aloud. "Then where is your daddy?"

"He's away in the army," the girl said firmly; she was the more lively of the two.

"That's right, children, give it to him! He's been away all these years and now he thinks everybody ought to know him when at last he comes home!" Ilyinichna intervened with feigned severity, and smiled at Grigory. "Even your wife will be giving you up soon! We were already looking for a man for her!"

"What's this mean, Natalya? Eh?" Grigory turned jokingly to his wife.

She blushed, but overcoming her embarrassment, went across to him and sat down at his side. Her

boundlessly happy eyes drank him in, and her hot rough hand stroked his arm, dry and brown.

Grigory put his arm across his wife's broad back and thought for the first time: "She's good-looking, anybody can see that. How did she live without me? I expect the Cossacks ran after her, and maybe she ran after one of them. Suppose she did!" At this unexpected thought his heart beat violently, and he stared searchingly at her rosy face, shining and fresh with cucumber pomade. Natalya flushed under his attentive gaze, and whispered:

"What are you looking at me like that for? Glad to see me again?"

"Why, of course!"

He drove away his unpleasant thought, but for a moment he felt a vague, almost unconscious hostility towards his wife.

The square was a rich blossom of Cossack trousers, caps, and here and there a shaggy black sheepskin cap. All the men of the village were assembled. No women were there, only the old men, and the Cossacks who had been at the war, and still younger men. The very oldest stood in front, leaning on their sticks: honorary judges, the members of the church council, the school managers, and the churchwarden. Grigory's eyes searched for his father's black and silver beard, and found him standing at the side of Miron Grigoryevich. In front of them, in his grey, full-dress tunic and medals, old Grishaka was leaning on his knobby stick. Together with Pantelei and Miron were all the elders of the village. Behind them stood the younger men, many of them comrades-in-arms of Grigory. On the other side of the ring he noticed his brother Pyotr, his shirt adorned with the orange and black ribbons of the cross of St. George. On his left was Mitka Korshunov, lighting his cigarette from Prokhor Zykov's. Prokhor was drawing hard to help him, pursing his lips and rounding his calf-like eyes. Behind were crowded the youngest Cossacks. In the centre of the ring, at a rickety table with its four legs pressed into the soft, still damp earth, sat the

chairman of the village Revolutionary Committee. At his side stood a lieutenant whom Grigory did not know, dressed in a khaki cap with a cockade, a leather jacket with epaulettes, and khaki breeches. The chairman of the Revolutionary Committee was talking worriedly to him, and the officer stooped a little to listen with his large protruding ear close to the chairman's beard. The meeting hummed like a beehive. The Cossacks were talking and joking among themselves, but on all faces were looks of anxiety. Someone could wait no longer, and shouted:

"Let's start! What are you waiting for? Nearly everybody's here."

The officer straightened up, removed his cap, and said, as simply as though in his own family circle:

"Elders of the village, and you front-line Cossack brothers! You have all heard what happened at the village of Syetrakov, haven't you?"

"Who's that, where's he from?" Christonya boomed.

"From Vyeshenskaya. Soldatov I think his name is."

"A day or two ago," the lieutenant continued, "a detachment of Red Guards arrived at the village. The Germans have occupied the Ukraine, and as they moved towards the Don Province they threw the Red Guards back from the railway. The Reds entered Syetrakov and began to pillage the Cossacks' possessions, to ravish their women, to carry out unlawful arrests, and so on. When the neighbouring villages heard what had happened they fell on them with arms in hand. Half the detachment was destroyed, the remainder taken prisoner. The Cossacks got some fine spoils. Now the Migulinskaya and Kazanskaya districts have flung the Bolshevik government out of their areas. Young and old, the Cossacks have risen in defence of the quiet Don. In Vyeshenskaya the Revolutionary Committee has been flung out neck and crop, and a district ataman has been elected; and the same is true in most of the villages."

At this point in the speech the old men gave vent to a restrained mutter.

"Everywhere detachments are being formed. You also ought to form a detachment of frontline Cossacks, in order to defend the district from the arrival of new savage robber hordes. We must set up our own administration. We don't want the Red government, they bring only debauchery, and not liberty! And we shall not allow the muzhiks to violate our wives and sisters, to make a mockery of our Orthodox faith, to desecrate our holy churches, to plunder our possessions and property. Don't you agree, elders?"

The meeting thundered with the sudden "aye!" The officer began to read out a proclamation. Forgetting his papers, the chairman slipped away from the table. The crowd of elders listened without uttering a word. The front-line men behind muttered among themselves.

As soon as the officer began to read, Grigory slipped out of the crowd and turned to go home. Miron Grigoryevich noticed his departure, and nudged Pantelei with his elbow.

"Your younger son—he's slipping off!"

Pantelei limped out of the ring and shouted in a tone of imperative appeal:

"Grigory!"

His son turned half-round and halted without looking back.

"Come back, Son!"

"What are you going away for? Come back!" came a roar of voices from the crowd, and a wall of faces turned in Grigory's direction.

"And he's been an officer!"

"You needn't turn up your nose!"

"He was with the Bolsheviks himself."

"He's shed Cossack blood!"

"The Red devil!"

The shouts reached Grigory's ears. He listened with grating teeth, evidently struggling with himself. It seemed as though in another minute he would go off without a look back. But Pantelei and Pyotr gave sighs of relief as he wavered and then with downcast eyes returned to the crowd.

The old men overwhelmingly carried the day. With amazing speed Miron Grigoryevich was elected ataman. His freckled face greying, he went into the middle of the ring and confusedly received the symbol of his authority, the ataman's copper-headed staff, from his predecessor.

The officer directed the meeting towards a business-like settlement of the remaining problems. He raised the question of electing a commander for the village detachment, and must have heard about Grigory in Vyeshenskaya, for he began by praising him, and through him the village.

"It would be well to have a commander who has been an officer. If we have to fight we shall do better and there will be fewer losses. And you've got plenty of heroes in your village. I cannot impose my will upon you, but for my part I recommend you to elect Cornet Melekhov."

"Which one? We've got two of them."

The officer ran his eyes over the crowd, noticed Grigory's bowed head and shouted with a smile:

"Grigory Melekhov! What do you think, Cossacks?"

"A good man!"

"Grigory Melekhov! He's a tough nut!"

"Come into the middle of the ring. The elders want to look at you."

Thrust forward from behind, Grigory, his face crimson, emerged into the middle of the ring and looked round him like a hunted animal.

"Lead our sons!" Matvei Kashulin rapped with his stick and crossed himself with a flourish of his arm. "Lead and guide them so that they will be with you like geese with a gander. As the gander defends its family and saves them from both man and beast, so you must watch over them! Earn four more crosses, may God grant it!"

Meanwhile four elders from the upper part of the village who had been holding a whispered consultation with the newly-appointed ataman approached the

officer. One of them, a little toothless old man, nicknamed "Wrinkle," was famous for having spent his life in petty legal wrangling. Wrinkle, who besides his other merits, loved the sound of his own voice, was the first to speak:

"Your Honour, it looks as if you don't know very much about our village, or you wouldn't have picked Grigory Melekhov for a commander. We elders have got a complaint against the choice. It's our right to complain, you know. We've got an objection to make against him."

"What objection? What's the matter?"

"Well, how can we trust him when he himself's been in the Red Guards and one of their commanders, and it's only two months since he came back from them with a wound."

The officer flushed, and his ears seemed to swell with the influx of blood.

"Is that really true? I hadn't heard that. No one said anything about it to me."

"It's true, he's been with the Bolsheviks," another elder affirmed grimly. "We can't trust him!"

It was a long time before the meeting quietened down again. In the heat of argument someone jostled someone else, someone's nose began to bleed, one of the youngsters was suddenly enriched with a swelling under his eye. When peace was at last restored they elected Pyotr Melekhov commander, and he fairly glowed with pride. But now, like a mettlesome horse confronted with too high a fence, the officer took a tumble. When the next step of calling for volunteers was taken, no volunteers were forthcoming. The front-line men, who had been restrained in their attitude throughout the meeting, hesitated and were unwilling to enrol, passing it off as a joke.

"Why don't you go, Anikushka?"

But Anikushka muttered:

"I'm too young. . . . I haven't any whiskers yet."

"None of your jokes! Trying to make a laughing-stock of us?" old Kashulin howled right into his ear.

With jesting and laughter some sixty men enrolled.

The meeting did not end until nearly noon. It was decided to dispatch the detachment the very next day to the support of the Migulinskaya villagers.

Next morning, out of the sixty volunteers only some forty turned up in the square. Pyotr, elegantly dressed in a greatcoat and high top boots, reviewed the Cossacks. Many of them had shoulder-straps with the numbers of their old regiments on them. Their saddles were loaded with saddle-bags containing food, linen, and cartridges brought back from the front. Not all of them had rifles, but the majority had cold steel.

A crowd of women, children and old men gathered in the square to see them off. Pyotr, on his prancing horse, drew up his half-company in ranks, inspected the motley collection of horses, the riders in greatcoats, tunics, and tarpaulin raincoats, and gave the order for departure. He walked the detachment up the hill. The Cossacks stared gloomily back at the village; someone in the last file fired a shot. At the top Pyotr drew on his gloves, stroked his wheaten whiskers, and turning his horse so that it advanced sideways, holding his cap on with his left hand, shouted:

“Squadron, trot!”

The detachment of Tatarsky Cossacks led by Pyotr Melekhov arrived in Ponomaryov at dawn of the same day. They found the village noisy with the clatter of Cossack boots, and the sound of horses being led to drink. Crowds were pouring towards the far end of the village. Pyotr halted his men in the centre of the village, and gave the order to dismount. Several Cossacks came up to them.

“Where are you from?” one of them asked.

“Tatarsky.”

“You’re a bit too late. We’ve caught Podtyolkov without your help. They’re shut up over there, like chickens in a coop.” He laughed and waved his hand towards the shop.

Christonya, Grigory, and several others went closer to the man. “Where are they going to send them?” Christonya inquired.

"To join the dead."

"What? You're lying!" Grigory seized the man by his greatcoat.

"Well, invent a better lie, Your Honour!" the man insolently retorted, and carefully freed himself from Grigory's strong fingers. "Look there; they've already built the gallows for them." He pointed to two ropes hanging from a cross-beam running between two stunted willows.

"Stable the horses," Pyotr commanded.

The sky was overcast. A fine rain was falling. A dense mass of Cossacks and women had gathered outside the village. Informed that the execution would take place at six o'clock, the inhabitants of Ponomaryov went along willingly as though to a rare and amusing spectacle. The women were dressed in holiday clothes; many of them had their children with them. The crowd swarmed over the pastureland, crowded around the gallows and the six-foot-deep pit. The children clambered over the raw clay of the mound thrown up on one side of the pit; the men animatedly discussed the forthcoming execution; the women whispered sadly among themselves.

With traces of sleep still visible on his serious face the chairman of the court martial arrived. His strong teeth showed as he smoked and chewed at his cigarette. In a hoarse voice he ordered the Cossack guards:

"Drive the people back from the hole. Tell Spiridonov to send along the first batch." He glanced at his watch and stood on one side, watching the crowd being driven back by the guards in colourful semicircle.

Whispers and muttering went up from the closely packed crowd when the first party of ten condemned prisoners, surrounded by a Cossack escort, set out from the shop.

Podtyolkov walked in front, barefoot, dressed in broad black breeches, his leather jerkin flung wide open. He set his great feet confidently on the muddy road, and when he slipped, raised his left arm slightly to keep his balance. At his side Krivoshlykov, deathly pale, could

hardly drag himself along. His eyes gleamed feverishly, his mouth twitched with suffering. As he draped his greatcoat over his shoulders, he shivered as though perishing with cold. For some reason these two were left their clothes, but the others had been stripped down to their underlinen. Lagutin walked at the side of Bunchuk. Both of them were barefoot and wearing little more than their shirts. Lagutin's ragged drawers revealed his yellowish skin, and he sheepishly drew them around him. Bunchuk stared over the heads of the guards at the grey shroud of clouds in the distance. His cold, sober eyes blinked expectantly and tensely; his broad palm stroked his hairy chest under the open collar of his shirt. One would have thought he was looking forward to something unattainable, yet pleasant to think upon. Some of the others maintained expressions of stolid indifference; a grey-haired Bolshevik scornfully waved his hand and spat at the feet of the Cossack guards. But two or three had such dumb yearning in their eyes, such boundless terror in their distorted faces, that even the guards turned their eyes away as they met their gaze.

They strode along swiftly. Podtyolkov gave his arm to the stumbling Krivoshlykov. They drew near to the white kerchiefs and red and blue caps of the crowd.

After the second volley the women in the crowd screamed and fled, jostling one another and dragging their children behind them. The men, too, began to move away. The loathsome scene of extermination, the screams and groans of the dying, the howling of those awaiting their turn were overwhelmingly oppressive, and the terrible spectacle was too much for the crowd. There remained only the front-line men, who had looked on death to their fill, and the most hardened of the elders.

Fresh groups of barefoot and unclothed Red Guards were brought up, new lines of volunteers confronted them, volleys spurted out, and single shots drily shook the air as the wounded were finished off. Hurriedly earth was shovelled over the first group of bodies in the trench. Podtyolkov and Krivoshlykov went across to

those awaiting their turn and endeavoured to encourage them. But their words had lost all significance: another power dominated these men whose lives in a minute or two were to be broken off like leaves withered at the stalk.

Grigory Melekhov pushed through the crowd to go back to the village, and came face to face with Podtyolkov. His former leader stepped back and stared at him.

"You here too, Melekhov?"

A bluish pallor overspread Grigory's cheeks, and he halted.

"Here. As you see...."

"I see...." Podtyolkov smiled wryly, staring with sudden hatred at Grigory's face. "Well, so you're shooting down your brothers? You've turned your coat? What a...." He strode closer to Grigory and whispered: "So you serve us and them too, whoever pays most? Well, you are a...."

Grigory seized his sleeve and asked breathlessly:

"Do you remember the battle at Glubokaya? Do you remember how they shot down the officers? Shot them down by your order? Huh? And now it's your turn. Don't moan! You're not the only one allowed to flay men's hides! You're finished, chairman of the Don commissars! You filthy swine, you sold the Cossacks to the Jews! Understand? Want to hear any more?"

"Allow us to say a last word before our deaths," Podtyolkov requested.

"Speak up! Go ahead!" the front-line men shouted.

He stretched his hands towards the little group that remained.

"See how few are left who wish to look on at our death!" Podtyolkov began. "Their conscience has pricked them. On behalf of the toiling people, in their interests we have struggled against the rats of generals, not sparing our lives. And now we are perishing at your hands! But we do not curse you! You have been bitterly deceived. The revolutionary government will come, and you will realize on whose side was the truth. You have laid the finest sons of the quiet Don in that pit...."

There was an increasing roar of voices, and his words were lost in the hubbub. Taking advantage of this, one of the officers kicked the stool from under his feet. Podtyolkov's great body fell and dangled, but his feet touched the ground. The knot gripping his throat choked him and forced him to draw himself upward. He rose on tiptoe, the toes of his bare feet digging into the damp earth, and gasped for air. Running his protruding eyes over the crowd, he said quietly:

"And you haven't even learned how to hang a man properly.... If I had the job, you wouldn't touch the ground, Spiridonov....!"

The spittle ran freely from his mouth. The masked officers and the nearest men raised the helpless, heavy body with difficulty on to the stool.

Podtyolkov was not allowed to finish his speech. The stool flew from under his feet and crashed against an abandoned shovel. The lean, muscular body swung to and fro for a long time, contracting into a huddled ball until the knees touched his chin, then stretching again with a convulsive shudder. He was still struggling, his black, protruding tongue was still writhing, when the stool was kicked a second time from under Podtyolkov. Again the body fell heavily, the seam of the leather jerkin burst on the shoulder; but again the ends of the toes reached the ground. The crowd of Cossacks groaned; some of them crossed themselves and hurried away. So great were the dismay and confusion that for a minute all stood as though rooted to the spot, staring fearfully at Podtyolkov's blackened face.

But he was speechless; the knot gripped his throat too tightly. He only rolled his eyes, from which streams of tears were falling, and twisted his mouth. Striving to lighten his suffering, he stretched his whole body terribly and torturously upward.

Someone at last thought of a solution, and began with a shovel to dig away the earth below him. With each swing the body hung more stiffly, the neck lengthened and lengthened, and the head was drawn back on to his shoulders. The rope could hardly bear his great weight; it swung gently, creaking at the cross-beam.

Yielding to its rhythmic movement, Podtyolkov swung also, turning in all directions as though to show his murderers his livid, blackening face and chest, flooded with hot streams of spittle and tears.

The front straightened out in a line from Filonovo to Povarino. The Reds were concentrating their forces, clenching their fist for a counter-blow. The Cossacks who were suffering from a severe shortage of munitions, developed their offensive feebly, making no attempt to cross the boundaries of the province. Successes shifted from one side to the other. In August there was a relative lull in the fighting, and the Cossacks who returned home for a brief furlough talked of an armistice in the autumn.

Meanwhile in the rear the grain was being harvested. The lack of workers made itself felt. The old men and the women could not manage the harvesting, and in addition they were continually hindered by requisitions of wagons and horses to carry military stores and provisions to the front. Almost every day five or six wagons were mobilized in Tatarsky, sent to Vyeshenskaya to load army stores, and then on to the Cossack forces.

Life in the village was active but dull. All thoughts turned towards the distant front and everyone awaited news of the Cossacks with pain and anxiety, expecting it to be bad. The arrival of Stepan Astakhov caused a general stir.

In every hut and on every threshing-floor it was the sole topic of conversation. A Cossack believed to have been buried long since, a man remembered only by the old women, and that with a muttered "Peace to his ashes!" had come home. If that wasn't a miracle....!

Stepan spent the first few days of his return quietly in Anikushka's hut, rarely showing himself in the street. The neighbours watched him, set guard over his every movement, and even tried to cross-examine Anikushka's wife as to what he intended to do. But she shut her lips tightly and pleaded ignorance. Rumours spread thickly through the village when she hired a horse and wagonette from the Melekhovs and early on the Saturday morning

drove off none knew whither. Only Pantelei scented what was afoot. "She's going for Aksinya," he winked to Ilyinichna as he harnessed the lame mare into the wagonette. He was not mistaken. Stepan had ordered the woman to go to Yagodnoye and ask Aksinya whether she would return to her husband, "forgetting all past wrongs."

Anikushka's wife returned from Yagodnoye as dusk was falling. As she prepared a meal in the summer kitchen, she told how Aksinya had been startled by the unexpected news, had asked many questions, but had flatly refused to return.

"She has no need to come back, she's living like a lady. She's grown smooth and her face is white. She never sees hard work, and what more does she want? You wouldn't believe the way she's dressed up! Today's a work day, but she was dressed in a skirt as clean as snow, and her hands were spotlessly clean," Anikushka's wife told him, swallowing her jealous sighs.

Rain fell at dawn, but after sunrise the sky cleared, and some two hours later only the clods of half-dry mud clinging to the cartwheels recalled the wet weather. In the morning Stepan rode into Yagodnoye. Feeling rather nervous, he tethered his horse at the gate and swung briskly into the servant's quarters. The spacious, grass-grown yard was deserted. Chickens were rummaging in the dung by the stables. A cock as black as a rook was stalking about by the fallen fence. While calling to the hens, he pretended to be pecking the red ladybirds on the fence. The sleek borzois lay in the shade by the coach-house. Six piebald young puppies had overthrown their mother and were kicking vigorously as they sucked at her. The dew sparkled on the shady side of the iron roof of the house.

Staring round him, Stepan entered the servants' quarters, and asked the corpulent cook:

"Can I see Aksinya?"

"And who are you?" Lukerya asked, wiping her sweaty, freckled face with her apron.

"That's nothing to do with you. Where is Aksinya?"

"With the master. Wait!"

Stepan sat down, putting his hat on his knees with a gesture of terrible weariness. The cook bustled about the kitchen without paying any more attention to him. The sour smell of curds and fermentation filled the room. Black flies sprinkled the stove, the walls, and the floury table. Stepan waited, listening tensely. The familiar sound of Aksinya's walk sent him starting up from the bench. He rose, letting his hat fall from his knees.

Aksinya entered, carrying a pile of plates. As she noticed Stepan, her face turned deathly pale and the corners of her lips quivered. She halted, helplessly pressing the plates against her breast, her startled eyes fixed on Stepan's face. Then somehow she broke away from where she was standing, went swiftly to the table, and put down the plates.

"Good morning," she said.

Stepan breathed slowly, deeply, as though in sleep; a tense smile forced his lips apart. Silently leaning forward, he held out his hand to Aksinya.

"Come into my room," she invited him with a gesture.

Stepan picked up his hat as though it were heavy. The blood rushed to his head and veiled his eyes. As soon as they had entered her room and sat down on opposite sides of the table, Aksinya, licking her dry lips, asked with a groan:

"Where have you come from?"

With a false attempt at gaiety Stepan waved his hand in a vague drunken manner. The same smile of gladness and pain still clung to his lips.

"From prison in Germany.... I've come to see you, Aksinya...."

He fidgeted awkwardly, jumped up, pulled a small packet out of his pocket, hurriedly tore the rag off it with trembling fingers, and drew out a lady's silver wrist-watch and a ring set with a cheap blue stone. He held it out to her in his sweaty palm, but her eyes remained fixed on his unfamiliar face with its distorted, humble smile.

"Take it, I've kept it for you.... We've lived together...."

"What do I want with it? Wait!" she whispered through numb lips.

"Take it....Don't scorn me. We must drop our old silliness."

Raising her hand as if to shield herself, she rose and went across to the stove.

"They said you were dead...."

"And would you have been glad?"

She did not reply, but more calmly examined her husband from head to foot, needlessly adjusting the folds of her carefully ironed skirt. With arms behind her, she said:

"Did you send Anikushka's wife to me? She said you wanted me to come back to you—to live."

"Will you come?" Stepan interrupted her.

"No!" Aksinya's voice sounded curt. "No, I won't come."

"Why not?"

"I've got out of the habit... and besides, it's rather late—too late."

"But I want to restore my farm. All the way back from Germany I thought of it, and while I was living there I never stopped thinking of it. What will you do, Aksinya? Grigory has left you... or have you found another? I've heard some story about you and the master's son here....Is it true?"

Aksinya's cheeks burned, and tears of shame started from under her lowered lashes.

"It's true enough. I'm living with him."

"Don't think I'm reproaching you." Stepan took alarm. "I was going to say that maybe you haven't yet decided on your life. He won't want you for long, he's just playing with you. You've got wrinkles under your eyes. He'll turn you out as soon as he's had enough of you. And then where will you go? Haven't you had enough of living in serfdom? Think it over.... I've brought money back with me, and when the war ends we'll live well. I thought we'd come together.... And I want to forget the past."

"Why didn't you think of it earlier, my friend?" she asked merrily through her tears, with a little

shiver. Breaking away from the stove, she came right up to the table. "What were you thinking of when you ground my young life into the dust? You drove me into Grisha's arms. You dried up my heart. Do you remember what you did to me?"

"I didn't come here to settle accounts. You—how do you know how much I've thought and suffered." Stepan stared at his arms flung over the table and spoke slowly, as though rooting the words out of his mouth. "I was always thinking about you. The blood clotted in my heart.... You never left my thoughts day or night.... I lived there with a widow, a German.... I lived well, but I left her.... I wanted to go home...."

"And now you feel like a quiet life?" Aksinya demanded, her nostrils quivering passionately. "You want to get on with your farming. You'd like to have children, I suppose, and a wife to wash for you, to feed you?" She smiled unpleasantly. "No, not for me, Christ save me! I'm old.... You can see my wrinkles. And I've forgotten how to bear children. I'm someone's mistress, and mistresses mustn't have children. Is that the kind you want?"

"You've grown sharp...."

"Such as I am, I am."

"So you say no?"

"I say no, I won't go! No!"

"Well, good-bye." Stepan rose, uncertainly turned over the wrist-watch in his hand, and laid it down again on the table. "If you change your mind, let me know," he added.

The next day Aksinya received her wages. She collected her possessions and, as she said good-bye to Yevgeny, burst into weeping.

"Don't think badly of me, Yevgeny Nikolayevich."

"Why, of course not, my dear.... Thank you for everything." His voice sounded artificially cheerful in his endeavour to hide his embarrassment.

She departed. She arrived at Tatarsky early in the evening. Stepan met her at the gate.

"So you've come?" he asked with a smile. "For good? May I hope that you won't ever go away again?"

"I won't," she answered simply, her heart contracting as she surveyed the half-demolished hut and the yard, overgrown with weeds and scrub.

Little by little Grigory became steeped in hatred for the Bolsheviks. They had burst into his life as enemies, they had taken him away from the land! He noticed that the other Cossacks were dominated by the same feeling. It seemed to them all that it was only because the Bolsheviks had invaded the Don Province that there was any war at all. As each man looked at the ungathered swaths of wheat, at the uncut grain trodden underfoot by his horse, he remembered his own land where his women were toiling beyond their strength, and his heart grew hard and brutal. Sometimes Grigory thought that his enemies, the Tambov, Ryazan, and Saratov peasants, must also be moved by the same passionate feeling for the land. "We're fighting over it as if it was a woman," he thought.

Fewer prisoners were taken. More frequently summary execution was meted out on the spot. A wave of looting swept over the front. The Cossacks pillaged the families of Red Guards and those suspected of Bolshevik sympathies; prisoners were stripped naked.

They took everything, from horses and wagons to bulky, quite unnecessary domestic articles. Cossacks and officers alike, everyone looted. The baggage trains were piled high with trophies: clothes, samovars, sewing-machines, harness, anything that had the least value. From the baggage trains the articles flowed homeward in a steady stream. Relatives arrived at the front, willingly bringing ammunition and provisions and piling their wagons with plunder. The cavalry regiments—and they were in the majority—were especially unbridled. The infantry had nothing in which to carry loot except their packs, but a horseman could fill his saddlebags, could load up his saddle and strap bundles behind it until his horse looked more like a pick-mule than an army charger. The Cossacks let themselves go

completely. Pillage in war-time had always been a prime factor in their behaviour. Grigory was well aware of that, both from stories of past wars and from his own experience. Even in the days of the German war, when his regiment had been wandering through Prussia, the brigade commander, an estimable and honest general, had pointed with his whip to a little town lying under the hills and had told the regiment:

"If you take it, for two hours the town is yours. But after two hours the first man caught looting will be put against a wall!"

But Grigory had somehow never got used to acting in that way. He took only food for his horse and himself, refusing to touch anything else and loathing pillage. He was especially repelled when his own Cossacks looted. He kept a tight hand over the squadron. If any of his men took anything, it was in secret and very rarely. He gave no orders for prisoners to be stripped and exterminated.

Grigory, now a troop commander, took over the house assigned to him and his men. It appeared that the owner had retreated with the Reds, and his elderly wife and daughter, a girl in her teens, waited on them submissively. Grigory went into the best room and looked around. The owners had evidently lived well, for the floor was painted and they had bent-wood chairs, a mirror, the usual photographs on the walls and a fulsomely worded school certificate in a black frame. Grigory hung up his wet rain-coat to dry on the stove and rolled a cigarette. Prokhor Zykov entered, put his rifle down against the bed, and informed him unconcernedly:

"Wagons have arrived from Tatarsky, and your father with them, Grigory Panteleyevich!"

"Any more tales like that?"

"It's true; there are six wagons from our village. Go and meet them."

Grigory put on his greatcoat and went out. He found his father leading his horse through the gate of the yard. Darya, wrapped in a homespun coat, was sitting in the wagon, holding the reins. A moist smile and

laughing eyes gleamed at Grigory from under the cowl of her coat.

"What brought you here?" Grigory shouted, smiling to his father.

"Ah, Son, it's good to see you alive. We're visiting you as uninvited guests...."

Grigory embraced his father's broad shoulders and began to unfasten the traces from the wagon. They talked snatchily as they unharnessed the horses. "We've brought ammunition for you to go on fighting with," his father told him. Darya took food and some oats for the horses out of the wagon.

"Why did you come, too?" Grigory asked her.

"I came with Father. He hasn't been well. Mother was afraid something might happen and he'd be alone in strange parts."

"I want to talk to you," the old man patted Grigory's knee and whispered. "I went to see Pyotr a week ago. I did well there, Son. Pyotr's got a fine eye for the farm. He gave me clothing, a horse, sugar... a fine horse."

"Wait!" Grigory interrupted harshly, burning as he guessed the drift of the old man's remarks. "You haven't come here for that?"

"And why not?"

"What do you mean: 'Why not'?"

"Other men take things, Grigory".

"Other men! Take things!" Grigory repeated furiously, at a loss for words. "Haven't they got enough of their own? You're a lot of swine! Men were shot for that sort of thing in the German war...."

"Don't you carry on like that!" his father checked him coldly. "I'm not asking you. I don't want anything. I'm alive today, but tomorrow I'll be stretching out my legs. You think of yourself. Think you're very rich, do you? One small wagonette on the farm, and he.... Why shouldn't you take from those who've gone over to the Reds? It's a sin not to take from them. Every bit and stick would be of use at home...."

"No more of that, or I'll pack you off quick! I've given Cossacks a good hiding for that, and here is my father come to plunder the people!" Grigory quivered

and panted.

They were silent for a moment. As he lit a cigarette, by the light of the match Grigory momentarily saw his father's embarrassed and affronted face. Only now did he realize the reason for his father's arrival. "And that's why he's brought Darya, the old devil! To look after the loot!"

"You haven't a spare rifle, have you?"

"What do you want it for?"

"For home. To keep away the animals and strangers. Just in case. I've got a whole box of cartridges. I took it when I was carting ammunition."

"Take a rifle out of the wagon. We've got plenty of that kind of present," Grigory smiled gloomily. "Well, now go to sleep. I've got to make a round of the posts."

Next morning part of the regiment, Grigory's squadron among them, was shifted from the village. Grigory departed confident that he had shamed his father, and that the old man would go back with empty hands. But after seeing the Cossacks off, Pantelei went as though he were the master into the granary, took horse-collars and harness down from the pegs, and carried them to his wagon. The mistress of the house followed him, weeping and shouting and clinging to his shoulder:

"My dear man! Aren't you afraid to commit such sin? What are you hurting orphans for? Give me back the collars. Give me them for the love of God!"

"Now, now; you leave God out of it!" Pantelei pushed her off. "I expect your husband would take things from us. I know your commissars! What's yours is mine, so shut up!"

Then, watched in sympathetic silence by the other carters, he broke the locks on the chests and selected new trousers and coats, held them up to the light, felt them in his black hands, and tied them up in a bundle.

He and Darya set off on the homeward journey about noon. The wagon was piled high, and Darya sat with compressed lips on top of the bundles. Behind her towered a boiler which Pantelei had torn out of its

place in the bath-house. He could hardly carry it to the wagon, and when Darya said reproachfully: "You wouldn't leave your own dirt behind, Father!" he angrily told her: "Shut up, you squawker! Leave them that boiler? You're as fine a house-wife as Grigory, you slut! I've taken a fancy to that boiler. You keep your mouth shut."

As the weeping woman shut the gate behind him, he said benevolently:

"Good-bye, woman. Don't be angry. You'll soon get some more."

Almost all the Tatarsky Cossacks who had been on the Northern Front had returned to the village, abandoning their regiments as they slowly retreated towards the Don. Every day a belated rider arrived in the village. Some came back to unsaddle their cavalry mounts for many a day and to await the arrival of the Reds, thrusting their military equipment into a rick of straw or under the eaves of a shed. But others only led their horses into the yard, spent the night with their wives, and next morning, replenishing their stock of provisions, rode off again along the steppe tracks, looking back for the last time from the hill-top down on the white, dead sweep of the Don, and on their native village, left behind maybe for ever.

The night after Pyotr arrived from Vyeshenskaya there was a family council in the Melekhov house.

"Here, soldier! What's the matter?" His father asked.

"We're finished, Father!" Pyotr's mouth writhed, his bleached eyebrows quivered, and, hiding his eyes, he blew his nose into his dirty tobacco-stained handkerchief.

"What do you think about it all?" Grigory asked, his dark-veined hand resting on his daughter's head.

"There's nothing to think about. I'll spend tomorrow at home and ride off when night comes. Get me some food ready, Mother," he told Ilyinichna.

"You're clearing out, that means?" Pantelei thrust his fingers into his tobacco pouch and remained standing with

a pinch of tobacco between them, awaiting Pyotr's reply.

Pyotr rose, crossed himself before the dark icons, and stared at him harshly and bitterly.

"Christ save me, I've had enough! Clearing out, you say! And what else? Why should I stay behind? To have the red-bellies chop my head off? Maybe you're thinking of staying here, but I'm not! They'll have no mercy on officers."

That night there was merry-making at Anikushka's. The Red Guards quartered on him asked him to invite his Cossack neighbour in for a spree. Anikushka called for the Melekhovs.

"They're Reds?" he asked. "Well, what if they are Reds? They've been baptized, haven't they? They're Russian like us. By God, believe it or not. I'm sorry for them. There's a Jew among them, but he's a man, too. We killed off the Jews in Poland, I know. But this one gave me a glass of vodka. I like the Jews. Come on, Grigory, Pyotr! Don't look down on me...."

At first Grigory refused to go, but his father advised him:

"Go along, or they may say we think them beneath us. Go on, don't bring up their past sins against them."

Pyotr and Grigory went with Anikushka into the yard. The warm night promised fair weather. There was a scent of ashes and burning dung-fuel in the air. The three Cossacks stood for a moment in silence, then went on. At the wicket-gate Darya overtook them. Her arched, pencilled eyebrows gleamed a velvety black in the dim light of the moon.

"They're making my wife drunk," Anikushka muttered. "But they won't get what they want. I've got eyes...." Tipsy with home-made vodka, he went reeling against the fence and stumbled off the path into a snowdrift.

The blue, granular snow scrunched like sugar under their feet. A snow-shower whipped down from the grey coverlet of the sky and the wind blew sparks from the men's cigarettes, dusting them with powdered snow. High up under the stars it threw itself fiercely on a

downy cloud, like a hawk on a swan, and white feathers of snow scattered over the submissive earth, covering the village, the steppe, and the tracks of man and beast.

In Anikushka's hut there was no air to breathe. Sharp black tongues of soot were licking out of the lamp, and nothing could be seen through the haze of tobacco-smoke. His long legs flung out in front of him, a Red Army accordion-player was working the bellows of his instrument vigorously. Red Army men were sitting on the benches with Anikushka's women neighbours. Anikushka's own wife was being caressed by a burly fellow in padded khaki trousers, and boots loaded with enormous spurs that might have been taken from a museum. His cap of fine lambskin was thrust on the back of his head, and his brown face was sweating. One moist hand burned into the woman's back. She was already fuddled, and although she would have moved away if she could, she hadn't the strength. She caught her husband's look and the other women's smirks, but she just hadn't the strength to shake the powerful arm from her back. She sat laughing drunkenly and feebly.

Open jugs stood on the table and the whole hut stank of liquor. The table cloth was a dirty rag.

In the middle of the room a cavalry troop commander wearing breeches and chrome, yellow boots was dancing and writhing like a green devil. Grigory stared from the threshold at the boots and breeches and thought: "Taken off an officer!" He raised his eyes to the man's face: it was swarthy dark, streaming with sweat, the large round ears protruded, the lips were thick and pendulous. "A Jew, but smart on his feet," Grigory thought. They poured out home-made vodka for him and Pyotr. Grigory was careful how he drank, but Pyotr quickly got fuddled. And within an hour he was doing the Cossack dance on the earthen floor, tearing up the dust with his heels, and shouting hoarsely to the accordion-player to go faster. Grigory sat by the table cracking pumpkin seeds. Beside him was a machine-gunner, a native of Siberia.

The accordion-player struck up a polka. The Red Army men invited their Cossack women to dance.

Swaying tipsily, one of them asked a young wife, a neighbour of Christonya's, to be his partner; but she refused and, picking up her skirt, ran across to Grigory.

"Come and dance," she asked him.

"I don't want to."

"Come on, Grigory, my golden flower!

"Don't be a fool! I won't!"

She dragged at him by the sleeve, laughing forcedly. He frowned and resisted, but, noticing her wink, gave in. After a couple of rounds she took advantage of a lull in the dance to put her head on Grigory's shoulder and whisper almost inaudibly:

"They're planning to kill you. . . . Someone told them you're an officer. Get out of here."

Then she added aloud: "Oh, my head's swimming."

With sudden cheerfulness Grigory went across to the table and drank a mug of vodka. He turned to ask Darya:

"Pyotr drunk?"

"Almost."

"Get him home!"

Darya led Pyotr out, resisting his pushing and stumbling with masculine strength. Grigory followed them.

"Hey, where are you off to? No, don't go!" Anikushka ran after Grigory, but he gave him such a glance that Anikushka spread out his arms and staggered off.

At the threshold Grigory waved his cap. "Thanks for your company!" he muttered.

The curly-haired Red Guard adjusted his belt and followed Grigory. On the steps, breathing in his face, his bold eyes glittering, the man whispered:

"Where are you going?" He seized the sleeve of Grigory's greatcoat.

"Home!" Grigory replied without stopping, dragging the man after him. With a thrill of joy, he resolved: "You don't take me alive!"

Breathing heavily, gripping Grigory's elbow with his left hand, the Red Guard walked at his side. They halted at the wicket-gate. Grigory heard the door scrape behind them, and at the same moment he noticed the Red Guard's right hand pawing at his side and

heard his nails scratch the holster of his revolver. For one second Grigory saw the man's steely eyes fixed on his face. He turned and seized the hand tearing at the holster flap. Gripping it by the wrist, with terrible force he jerked the man's arm over his right shoulder, stooped, and with all his old skill flung the heavy body across his back and dragged the hand downward. He heard the crunching sound of the elbow joint cracking. The fair curly head plunged downward and was buried in a drift.

Bending low behind the fences, Grigory ran along a side lane towards the Don. He ran springily, making for the point where the road dropped down to the bank. "So long as there isn't an outpost there..." he thought. He halted for a moment. Behind him all Anikushka's yard lay open to view. He heard a shot. The bullet whistled past him rapaciously. More shots. "Under the hill, across the Don," he decided. When he was half way across a bullet whistled close to him and buried itself in the ice, sending fragments flying. From the farther side of the river he looked back. The shots were still cracking like a drover's whip. He felt no warmth of gladness at his escape, but was oppressed with a feeling of indifference to all that happened. "They might have been hunting an animal," he thought mechanically as he halted again. They won't search for me. They'll be afraid to come into the forest. I gave his arm something to remember me by. The scum, he thought he could take a Cossack with bare hands."

On his arrival with the transport at Bokovskaya, Grigory was compelled to drive on a further stage. He did not return for ten days. Two days before his arrival in Tatarsky his father was arrested. Old Pantelei had only just risen from his sick-bed. He was still more gaunt and grizzled. His hair lay as though moth-eaten on his forehead, his beard was thin and edged with grey.

The militiaman carried him off after giving him ten minutes to get his things together. He was put down in Mokhov's cellar until he could be sent to Vyeshen-

skaya. With him under arrest were nine other elders and one honorary judge.

Pyotr communicated the news to Grigory before his brother had ridden into the yard, and advised him:

"You turn round and go back, Brother! They've been asking when you'll be home. Go and get warm and see your children, then clear off to Ribny village, where you can hide and wait your time. If they ask me I'll tell them you've gone to your aunt at Singin. They've put seven of ours up against the wall, have you heard? I hope to God Father won't go the same way! But as for you. . . ."

Grigory sat for half an hour in the kitchen, then, saddling his horse, galloped through the night to Ribny. A distant relative and trustworthy Cossack hid him in his shed among the dung-fuel bricks. There he lay for two days, coming out only at night.

The shed stank of rotten straw, dry dung, and wisps of hay. In the day-time a grey light filtered through the roof. Sometimes the sun peeped in through the wattle door. At night there was the squeaking of mice, and silence.

The mistress of the hut surreptitiously brought Grigory food once a day, in the evening. A pitcher of water stood buried in the dung-fuel bricks. Life wouldn't have been too bad, but he had smoked all his tobacco. He was tormented by his situation during the first day and, unable to hold out without something to smoke, in the morning he crawled over the earthen floor and collected some dry horse-dung in his hands. He rubbed it in his palms and made it into cigarettes. In the evening the master sent him withered pages torn from a copy of the Gospels, a box of matches, and a handful of dry clover and roots. Grigory was overjoyed, smoked until he was nearly sick, and had his first sound sleep on the dung bricks.

Next morning he was awakened by his Cossack friend running into the shed and shouting sharply:

"You asleep? Get up! The Don has broken its ice!" And he laughed heartily.

Grigory jumped to the floor, bringing the dung bricks

rumbling down behind him.

"What's happened?" he demanded.

"The Yelanskaya and Vyeshenskaya Cossacks have risen on the other side. Fomin and all the government at Vyeshenskaya have fled to Tokin. They say that Kazanskaya, Shumilinskaya, and Migulinskaya have also risen."

The bunches of veins swelled on Grigory's brow and neck, his eyes spurted little green sparks. He could not conceal his joy: his voice trembled, his black fingers fidgeted with the fastenings of his greatcoat.

"And here in your village? Has anything happened here?" he asked.

"I've heard nothing. I saw the chairman just now and he laughed. 'I don't care what God we pray to, so long as there is a God,' he said. But you can come out of your hole."

They went towards the house. Grigory walked with great strides, and the Cossack hurried at his side, telling him the news:

"In the Yelanskaya District Krasnoyarsky was the first to rise. Two days ago a score of the Yelanskaya Communists went to arrest some Cossacks. The Krasnoyarsky men heard of it, got together, and decided: 'How long are we going to stand this? They're taking our fathers, they'll be taking us next. Saddle horses and we'll go and get the arrested men free.' Some fifteen fine lads were collected. They had only a couple of rifles, some swords and pikes. They found the Communists resting in a yard at Melnikov's, and poured into the attack on their horses. But it had a stone wall round it, and they were beaten off. The Communists killed one of them, peace on his soul. But from that moment the end of the Soviet regime was near, damn it!"

Grigory greedily ate the remains of his breakfast and went with his friend into the street. The Cossacks were standing about in little groups at the corners as though the day was a holiday. They went up to one group. The Cossacks raised their hands to their caps in greeting and replied restrainedly, staring expectantly and curiously at Grigory's unfamiliar figure.

"He's one of us. Don't be afraid. You've heard of the Melekhovs of Tatarsky? This is Pantelei's son Grigory. He came to me to save himself from being shot," the master said proudly.

They began to talk, but just as one of the Cossacks was telling how the Reds had been driven out of Vyeshenskaya two horsemen appeared at the end of the street. They galloped along, stopping by each group of Cossacks, turning their horses and shouting something, waving their arms. Grigory waited eagerly for their approach.

"They're not any of our men. They're messengers from somewhere," one of the Cossacks remarked as he stared.

The two men rode up to the group. One of them, an old man with sheepskin flung wide open, his face red and sweating, his grey hair hanging over his forehead, reined in his horse youthfully and stretched out his right hand:

"Cossacks, why are you gossiping at the street corners like women?" he cried. Tears broke his voice, his livid cheeks quivered with agitation.

His horse, a fine four-year-old bay with white nostrils, long bushy tail and legs like tempered steel, pranced under him. Snorting and champing her bit she reared up and strained at the bridle, asking to be given her head, so that she could go off again at a dancing gallop with her ears flat, the wind whistling in her mane and the frozen earth ringing under her cleanly hollowed hoofs. Every muscle of her neck and legs rippled and quivered under her fine skin. Her transparently pink muzzle trembled and her protruding white and ruby eyes shot fierce demanding glances at her master.

"What are you standing here for, sons of the quiet Don?" the old man shouted again, shifting his glance from Grigory to the other Cossacks. "They're shooting your fathers and grandfathers. They're taking away your possessions. The Jewish commissars are jeering at our faith and you're chewing sunflower seeds and running after the women. You're waiting till they put a noose round our throats. Forget about skirts for a bit! All Yelanskaya District, young and old, has risen. They've

driven the Reds out of Vyeshenskaya, and you—have you got peasant kvass instead of Cossack blood in your veins? Rise! Get your arms! Krivsky village has sent us to raise your village. To horse, Cossacks, before it's too late!" He fixed his frenzied eyes on the face of one elderly acquaintance and shouted with great scorn: "What are you standing there for, Semyon Christoforovich? The Reds cut down your son at Filonovo, and you're hiding away on the stove!"

Grigory did not stay to hear more. He ran towards the yard. Tearing his nails till they bled, he dug his saddle out of the dung blocks, saddled his horse, brought it out of the chaff-shed, and flew through the gate as though possessed.

"I'm off! God be with you!" he managed to shout to his friend and, bending over the saddle-bow right against his horse's neck, lashing the animal with his whip, he put it into a gallop. The snowy dust settled again behind him, his legs rubbed against the saddle, the stirrups clattered loosely against his boots. The horses' hoofs raced under him. He felt such a tremendous, ferocious gladness, such an influx of strength and resolution that, despite himself, a whistling rattle burst from his throat. His imprisoned, secret feelings were released within him. Now at last it seemed that his road henceforth was clear, as clear as the moonway across the steppe.

Flaming with a blind hatred, Grigory galloped until his horse carried him across the white-maned pall of the Don. For one moment a doubt assailed him: "It's rich against poor, and not Cossack against Russian. . . . Misha Koshevoi and Ivan Alexeyevich are Cossacks too, and they're Red through and through." But he angrily shook off the thought.

Tatarsky appeared in the distance. He pulled on the reins. His lathered horse dropped into an easy trot. At his own gate he urged it on again; it charged the wicket-gate open and galloped into the yard.

By the day of Grigory's arrival in Tatarsky two squadrons of Cossacks had already been assembled. A

village assembly had decided to mobilize all men capable of bearing arms, from sixteen to seventy. Many felt the hopelessness of the position: in the north was the Voronezh Province held by the Bolsheviks, and the Khoper District, which was sympathetic to them; in the south was the front, which might turn back and crush the insurgents under its avalanche. Certain more cautious Cossacks did not want to take up arms, but they were compelled.

The insurgents were still without a unified organization. The villages were acting uncoordinately, independently forming squadrons, electing commanders from the most militant of the Cossacks, taking into account not rank but services. They undertook no offensive operations, and only made contacts with the neighbouring villages and sent out mounted patrols.

Before Grigory's arrival, his brother Pyotr had been chosen as commander of the mounted squadron in Tatarsky, while Latyshev took command of the infantry. The artillerymen, with Ivan Tomilin at their head, had gone off to a nearby village where the Reds had left a damaged field-gun, and were trying to repair it. The fire-arms brought from Vyeshenskaya were distributed among the Cossacks. Pantelei, released with the others from Mokhov's cellar, dug up his machine-gun. But there were no cartridge-belts, and the squadron would not accept the gun as part of their equipment.

The next evening news came that a punitive detachment of Red soldiers, numbering some three hundred, with seven field-guns and twelve machine-guns, were advancing from Karginskaya to suppress the rising. Pyotr resolved to send out a strong patrol and also informed Vyeshenskaya. The patrol of thirty-two men under Grigory's command left in the twilight. They galloped out of the village, maintaining the same pace almost as far as Tokin. Some two versts this side of the village, close to a shallow gully, Grigory dismounted his Cossacks and distributed them in the gully. The horses were led off into a dell, where deep snow was lying. They sank belly-deep into the snow. One of the stallions, with the spring stirring in his blood, was

noisy and troublesome and a man had to be detailed specially to look after him.

Grigory sent three Cossacks—Anikushka, Martin Shamil, and Prokhor Zykov—on to the village. They set out at a walking pace. In the deep blue of the slopes the Tokin orchards zigzagged away to the south-east. Night had fallen. Low clouds rolled over the steppe. The Cossacks sat silently in the gully. Grigory watched the silhouettes of the three horsemen until they dropped down the hill and blended with the black outline of the road. Now their horses were no longer visible, only their heads could be seen. Then they disappeared completely. A moment or two later a machine-gun began to stutter on the other side of the hill. Then another, evidently a light machine-gun, broke out in a higher tone. The light gun lapsed into silence and after a brief pause the first gun hurriedly finished another belt. A hail of bullets swept through the dusk high above the gully, with a lively cheerful whistle. The three Cossacks came galloping back at full speed.

"We ran into an outpost," Prokhop Zykov shouted when still some way off, and his voice was lost in the thunder of horses' hoofs.

Grigory gave orders for the horses to be held in readiness, then jumped out of the gully, and, taking no notice of the bullets burying themselves with a whistle in the snow, went to meet the Cossacks.

With his half-squadron Grigory struck at the baggage sledges, killed eight Red Guards, and captured four sledges laden with ammunition and two saddle-horses. He lost one horse, and one Cossack suffered the merest scratch.

But while Grigory was retreating along the Don with the captured sledges, completely unmolested and rejoicing at his success, the struggle had come to an end on the hill above Tatarsky. Before the battle began a squadron of Red cavalry had set out on a seven-verst march to outflank the Cossacks and, suddenly appearing round the hill, they fell upon the men minding the horses. A panic set in, and the Cossacks fled with the horses out of the gully. Some of them succeeded in

leading the mounts back to the lines, but most of them were cut down by the Red cavalry or ran in confusion to escape. The infantry were unable to fire for fear of hitting their own men, and they poured down into the gully like peas out of a sack, taking to disorderly flight. Those of the Cossack cavalry who succeeded in catching horses (and they were the majority) vied with one another in a headlong race back to the village.

As soon as Pyotr heard the shout and realized what had happened, he commanded:

"To horse! Latyshev, take the infantry across the gully!"

But he failed to reach his own horse. The youngster who had charge of it came galloping towards him, leading his and Fedot Bodovskov's mounts. But a Red Army man behind him pounded and slashed at his shoulder. Fortunately a rifle was hanging at the lad's back, and instead of cutting him down, the sword slipped against the rifle-barrel and flew out of the man's hand. But the youngster's horse turned aside and galloped off, and Pyotr's and Fedot's horses followed it. Pyotr groaned and stood for a moment, white-faced, the sweat pouring down his cheeks. He looked back. Some dozen Cossacks were running towards him.

"We're done for!" Bodovskov shouted, his face distorted with terror.

"Down into the gully, Cossacks! Brothers, into the gully!" Pyotr mastered himself, led them at a run to the edge, and rolled helter-skelter down the steep slope. At the bottom he jumped up and shook himself like a dog. Some ten Cossacks tumbled down behind him.

His whistling whisper seemed to put new life into them. Bodovskov, Martin Shamil, and two other Cossacks ran to the other side of the gully and lay down under the cliff; the others remained with Pyotr. In spring-time the rushing flood of hill water sends the stones rolling down and washes away the bottom of the gully, eating into the layers of red clay and cutting holes and passages in the walls of the cliff. And in these holes the Cossacks hid themselves.

Above them they heard the sound of running feet,

and snow and sand sprinkled down into the gully.

"There they are!" Pyotr whispered and grabbed Antip's sleeve, but he snatched his hand recklessly away and looked up keeping his finger on the trigger.

No one approached close to the edge, but the Cossacks heard the sound of voices and someone shouting at a horse.

"Talking over how to get at us," Pyotr thought, and again the sweat poured down his back and over his chest and face.

There was a shout from above them: "Hey, you, come on out! We'll kill you in any case!"

A milky-white stream of snow poured into the gully. Evidently someone was coming close to the edge. Another voice remarked confidently:

"They jumped down there; here are their footmarks. And I saw them myself."

"Pyotr Melekhov, come out of there!"

For a moment Pyotr was gripped with a blind joy. "Who is there among the Reds who knows me? They must be our own Cossacks, they've driven them off," he thought. But next moment the same voice made him shiver.

"It's Mikhail Koshevoi speaking. We call on you to surrender. In any case you won't get out."

Pyotr wiped his damp brow, and streaks of bloody sweat were left on his palm. A strange feeling of indifference, almost of oblivion, crept over him. And Antip's shout seemed very distant:

"We'll come out if you'll let us go. If not we shall shoot!"

"We'll let you go," the reply came from above, after a momentary silence.

With a terrible effort Pyotr shook off his lethargy. He thought he had detected a sneer in the words "let you go." He shouted hoarsely: "Back!" But no one listened to him. All the Cossacks except Antip crawled out of the gully.

He was the last to emerge. Within him, like a babe below a woman's heart, life was stirring powerfully. The instinct for self-preservation had prompted him to

remove the bullets from his rifle magazine before he climbed up the steep slope. His eyes were muddy, his heart filled his chest. He was choking like a child in heavy sleep. He tore his collar open. His eyes were filled with sweat, his hands slipped over the cold slope of the cliff. Panting, he clambered to the spot where they were standing, threw his rifle down at his feet, and raised his hands above his head. The Cossacks who had come out before him were huddled close together. Mikhail Koshevoi stepped out of the group of Red foot and horse soldiers and strode towards them. He went up to Pyotr and, standing right in front of him, his eyes fixed on the ground, asked quietly:

"Had enough of fighting?" He waited a moment for an answer, then, still staring at Pyotr's feet, asked in the same tone: "You were in command of them, weren't you?"

Pyotr's lips quivered. With a gesture of terrible weariness, with great difficulty he raised his hand to his wet brow. Mikhail's long eye-lashes flickered, his swollen upper lip curled. His body was shaken with such a violent shudder that it seemed he would not be able to keep his feet. But he at once raised his eyes to Pyotr's, gazed straight into his pupils, piercing them with a strangely alien gaze, and muttered hurriedly:

"Undress!"

Pyotr quickly threw off his sheepskin jacket, carefully rolled it up, and laid it on the snow. He removed his cap, his belt, his khaki shirt, and, sitting on the edge of his jacket, began to pull off his boots, turning paler every moment.

Ivan Alexeyevich dismounted and came across to them, gritting his teeth in fear of bursting into tears.

"Don't take off your shirt," Mikhail whispered and, shuddering, shouted abruptly:

"Quicker, you..."

Pyotr hastily thrust his woollen stockings into the tops of his boots and, straightening up, stepped off his coat with his bare feet, a saffron yellow against the snow.

Hardly moving his lips, Pyotr called to Ivan

Alexeyevich: "Cousin!" Ivan stood watching silently as the snow melted under Pyotr's bare feet. "Cousin Ivan, you were the godfather of my child. . . . Cousin, don't shoot me," Pyotr pleaded. Seeing Mikhail had already raised his revolver to the level of his chest, he dilated his eyes as though expecting a dazzling flash, and drew his head down into his shoulders.

He did not hear the shot; he fell headlong, as though someone had struck him a violent blow.

It seemed to him that Koshevoi's outstretched hand seized his heart and squeezed the blood from him. With a last effort Pyotr threw open the collar of his shirt and lay bare the bullet hole under his left nipple. At first the blood oozed slowly from the wound; then, finding vent, it spurted up in a thick dark stream.

At dusk a reconnaissance party sent out from Tatarsky returned with the news that they had found no trace of the Reds, but that Pyotr Melekhov and ten other Cossacks were lying slashed to death in the steppe.

Grigory arranged for sledges to bring in the bodies; then, driven out of his own home by the women's lamentations over the dead Pyotr and Darya's hysterical weeping, he went to spend the night with Christonya. Until dawn he sat by the stove in Christonya's hut, smoking cigarette after cigarette and carrying on an aimless conversation with the drowsy guardsman, as though afraid of being left face to face with his own thoughts, with his grief for his brother.

By order of the commander of the combined insurgent forces, Grigory Melekhov was appointed commander of the Vyeshenskaya Regiment, consisting of ten squadrons of Cossacks. The staff at Vyeshenskaya gave him instructions to march in the direction of Karginskaya District, to shatter Likhachov's detachment at any cost and drive it beyond the bounds of the region so that all the villages along the river Chir could be stirred to rebellion.

The day he took command of the regiment, he reviewed his Cossacks as they rode out of Vyeshenskaya. He sat bowed in his saddle, his horse reined in

tightly on a half-thawed mound at the roadside, while past him in column formation rode squadrons drawn from the Don-side villages: Bazki, Byelogorki, Olshansky, Merkulov, Gromkovsky, Semenovskiy, Ribinsky, Vodyansky, Lebyazhy and Yerik. With one gloved hand he stroked his moustache, wrinkling his hawk-like nose as he inspected each squadron with grim, watchful eyes. The Cossacks who knew him smiled as they rode past. Rings of tobacco-smoke floated and dissolved above the ranks, and steam rose from the horses.

When the regiment was some three versts outside Vyeshenskaya a patrol returned to report that the Reds were retreating in the direction of Chukarin. Likhachov's detachment did not engage them. Grigory dispatched three squadrons to outflank the enemy detachment, and with the remainder rode so hard on their heels that the Reds began to abandon their baggage train and ammunition boxes. As the Likhachov battery was driving out of Chukarin it lost some of its guns in a little stream. The drivers cut the traces and galloped off. The Cossacks rode twelve versts beyond Chukarin towards Karginskaya without encountering serious opposition, and they began to talk of reaching Novocherkassk.

Grigory was glad of the captured battery. "They didn't even stop to spike the guns," he thought contemptuously. With the help of bullocks, the Cossacks hauled the battery out of the stream; gunners were at once forthcoming from the various squadrons; double sets of horses, six pairs to each gun, were harnessed to the limbers, and a half-squadron was assigned as guard.

The Cossacks took Karginskaya at dusk. Part of the Likhachov detachment together with the remaining three field-guns and nine machine-guns were captured. The others managed to escape northward.

Rain fell all night, and in the morning the gullies and ravines were roaring with water, the roads became almost impassable, the horses floundered in the melting snow and mud, the men dropped with weariness. Two squadrons sent to pursue the retreating enemy captured

some thirty of the Reds in the morning and brought them back to Karginskaya.

Grigory had established his headquarters in the large house of a local merchant. The prisoners were driven into the yard. Yermakov, the commander of the two squadrons, reported to Grigory:

"Twenty-seven Reds taken. Your orderly's brought your horse. Are you going off now?"

Grigory buckled his belt over his greatcoat, combed back his forelock in front of the mirror and only then turned to Yermakov.

"Let's go. We'll have a meeting in the square, then ride out."

"Do we need a meeting?" Yermakov grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "They're on their horses already, without any meeting. Look, here come the Vyeshenskaya men. Aren't they?"

Grigory looked out of the window. Squadrons were riding past four abreast in splendid order. Cossacks and horses alike were magnificent.

"Where the hell did they come from?" Grigory muttered joyfully, buckling on his sword as he ran out of the house.

Yermakov overtook him at the gate. A squadron commander was standing before Grigory with his hand raised in salute; he did not dare shake Grigory's hand.

"Comrade Melekhov?"

"Yes. Where are you from?"

"Accept us for your regiment. Our squadron was formed last night, in Likhovidov. The two other squadrons come from Grachov; Arkhipovka, and Vasilyevka."

"Take your Cossacks to the square. We're just going to hold a meeting."

Grigory's orderly (it was Prokhor Zykov) held Grigory's stirrup for him. Yermakov threw his iron body into the saddle, straightened the folds of his greatcoat and, riding over to Grigory, asked:

"What's to be done with the prisoners?"

Grigory seized him by the top button of his greatcoat and bent close to his ear. Little sparks glittered in his

eyes, but under his whiskers his lips were smiling with a wolfish smile.

"Send them under escort to Vyeshenskaya. You understand? But they are not to get farther than the other side of that rise." He waved his whip in the direction of the sandy slope rising above Karginskaya.

"That's the first step towards settling accounts for Pyotr," he thought, breaking into a trot, and for no apparent reason, lashed his horse so that a white weal appeared on its hindquarters.

The war was waged in unprecedented conditions. Along the Donets the Don White Army was holding the front, covering Novochoerkassk and preparing for a decisive struggle. And in the rear of the Eighth and Ninth Red armies opposing the White forces a rising had broken out infinitely complicating the already difficult task of mastering the Don area.

In April the Revolutionary Military Council was faced with the threat of the insurgents linking up with the White Army. The rising had to be suppressed at all costs, before it succeeded in eating away the Red front from the rear and uniting with the White Don Army. Crack forces were sent to take part in the task of suppression: naval crews from the Baltic and Black Sea fleets, tried and reliable regiments, armoured train crews, the most daring cavalry units. Five regiments of the Boguchanskaya Division, a force of nearly eight thousand bayonets, several batteries and five hundred machine-guns, were transferred from the Donets front. By April the Ryazan and Tambov Party courses were fighting with devoted courage on the Kazanskaya sector of the insurgent front, and were later joined by members of the Moscow military college; Latvian light infantry fought the rebels at Shumilinskaya.

The insurgent Cossacks suffered from a shortage of military equipment. At first there was a lack of rifles, later of bullets. They had to be won at the cost of blood, through attacks or night raids. And they were won. In April 1919 the insurgents were fully equipped with rifles and had eight batteries and a

hundred and fifty machine-guns.

At the beginning of the rising there were five million blank cartridges in the warehouse at Vyeshenskaya. The Regional Soviet mobilized all the finest blacksmiths, locksmiths, and gunsmiths, and a bullet foundry was organized. But there was no lead, and nothing from which to cast the bullets. Then, at the call of the Regional Soviet, all the villages began to collect their reserves of lead and copper. All the leaden parts in the steam mills were requisitioned, and a brief appeal was carried to the villages by mounted couriers:

Your husbands, sons, and brothers have nothing to shoot from their rifles. They are firing only with what they can get from the accursed enemy. Hand over all you have that is suitable for casting bullets. Take the leaden sieves from the winnowing machines.

Within a week not one winnowing machine throughout the entire district was left with a sieve. The women carried everything of use and of no use to the village Soviets; the lads of the villages where battles had occurred dug the shot out of the walls and rummaged in the ground in search of shell fragments. But even in this activity there was not complete unity: certain of the poorer women who did not wish to deprive themselves of their last household utensils were arrested and sent to Vyeshenskaya for being "sympathetic to the Reds." In Tatarsky the rich old Cossacks beat one younger Cossack, just returned from his regiment, until the blood came, because he uttered aloud the one incautious remark: "Let the rich spoil their winnowing machines. Maybe they've got reason to fear the Reds more than ruin."

The stocks of lead were melted down in the Vyeshenskaya workshop, but the finished bullets lacked nickel casings, and they also melted. When the rifles were fired the leaden bullets flew half melted and sizzling from the barrel and were effective only over a distance of three hundred yards. However, the wounds inflicted by them were terrible.

The thirty-five thousand insurgents were divided

into five divisions and a sixth special brigade. Grigory Melekhov was in command of the 1st Division, which lay along the river Chir. His section of the front bore the brunt of the attack of Red detachments brought back from the main Donets line, but he succeeded not only in repulsing the pressure of the enemy, but in assisting the less reliable 2nd Division with cavalry and infantry reinforcements.

The rising failed to spread northward as far as the Khoper and Ust-Medveditsa districts, although they were in a ferment and messengers came from them asking for forces to be flung in the direction of the Buzuluk and the upper reaches of the Khoper in order to rouse the Cossacks. The Cossack command could not risk an advance beyond the limits of the Upper Don Region, knowing that the great mass of the Khoper Cossacks supported the Soviet regime and would not take up arms against it. Nor did the messengers inspire confidence, for they had to admit that the Cossacks discontented with the Reds did not number so very many, that the officers left behind in quiet corners of the districts were all in hiding, while the front-line men were either at home or already in the Red forces, and the old men had neither strength nor their former prestige in the districts.

In the Ukrainian districts to the south the Reds had mobilized the young men, and they were fighting very willingly against the insurgents.

Thus the rising was confined within the borders of the Upper Don Region. And it grew clearer with every day and to every participant from the command downwards that they would not be able to defend their hearths and homes for long. Sooner or later the Red Army would turn back from the Donets Front and crush them.

The following day Grigory handed over the command of the division to one of his regimental commanders and, accompanied by Prokhor Zykov, rode off to Vyeshenskaya.

At Vyeshenskaya Grigory halted at the house of an

old Cossack acquaintance, asked him to cook the goose at once, and sent Prokhor off for vodka. He made no attempt to report to the staff. They sat drinking until late in the afternoon. During the conversation the old Cossack began to complain.

"The officers here are carrying on in a fine way, Grigory Panteleyevich," he began.

"What officers?" Grigory asked.

"Our own kind—Kudinov and the others."

"What are they doing?"

"They're taking it out of the non-Cossacks. They're arresting the families of those who've gone off with the Reds—arresting women, children, and old men. They've taken a relation of mine because of her son. But what's the point of that? Supposing you'd gone off with the Cadets to the Donets, and the Reds had arrested your father, Pantelei, that wouldn't have been fair, would it?"

"Of course not."

"But our own government is arresting them. When the Reds came here they did wrong to no one, but these have gone mad, there's no holding them."

Swaying a little, Grigory rose and reached for his greatcoat hanging on the bedpost. He was only slightly drunk.

"Prokhor!" he shouted. "My sword and pistol!"

"Where are you going, Grigory Panteleyevich?"

"That's not your business. Do as you're told."

Grigory hitched on his sword and revolver, fastened and belted his greatcoat, and went straight to the prison on the square. The sentry on duty at the gate barred his way and asked for his pass.

"Stand aside, I tell you!"

"I can't let anyone in without a pass."

Before Grigory had succeeded in pulling his sword half out of its scabbard, the sentry had fled through the door. With hand still on his sword-hilt, Grigory followed him into the corridor.

"I want the chief of the prison," he shouted. His face was pale, his brows knitted over his hooked nose. A limping little Cossack came running to him, a clerk

peeped out of the office. A moment later the chief appeared, sleepy and angry.

"You know that without a pass ..." he thundered, but, recognizing Grigory and staring into his face, he stammered:

"Is it you, Your ... Comrade Melekhov? What do you want?"

"The keys to the cells."

"To the cells?"

"Well, have I got to say it a dozen times? Give me the keys, you cur!" Grigory strode towards the man, and he fell back. But he replied firmly enough:

"I won't give you the keys. You have no right...."

"Right!" Grigory gnashed his teeth and drew his sword. In his hand it described a whistling circle under the low ceiling of the corridor. The clerk and the warder took wing like frightened sparrows, and the chief pressed back against the wall, his face whiter than the white-wash, and hissed through his teeth:

"There they are ... but I shall make a complaint."

"I'll give you good cause for complaint! You're too used to the rear. Brave fellows, arresting women and old men! I'll shake up the lot of you! Ride off to the front, you swine, or I'll cut you down where you stand." Grigory thrust his sword into its scabbard and struck the terrified chief with his fist, driving him with his knee and fist towards the outer door and roaring:

"To the front! Go on! Go on! Damn you ... you rear lice!"

He thrust the man outside and, hearing a noise in the inner yard of the prison, ran that way. At the entrance to the kitchen stood three warders. One of them held a rusty Japanese rifle and was shouting hurriedly:

"An attack is being made on the prison. We must drive him off. What do the old regulations say?"

Grigory pulled out his pistol, and the warders ran headlong into the kitchen.

"Come out, all of you. And go home!" Grigory roared, throwing open the doors of the crowded cells

and shaking a bunch of keys. He released all the prisoners, some hundred persons all together, forcibly dragged out those who were afraid to go, drove them into the street, and locked up the empty cells.

Next morning Grigory made ready to drive out into the steppe. Ilyinichna and Dunya had been up betimes to light the fire and prepare food for the ploughman by dawn. Grigory planned to spend five days at work, sowing for themselves and his mother-in-law, ploughing four acres for melons and sunflowers. Then he would recall his father from the infantry company to finish the sowing.

The lilac smoke ascended in a spiral from the chimney. Dunya ran about the yard collecting brushwood for the fire. Grigory stared at her shapely waist, at the swelling breasts, and thought sadly and vexedly: "How she's grown! Time gallops past. Only the other day Dunya was a snivelling little girl, with her pigtails dancing over her back as she ran, and now she's ready for a husband. And I'm going grey-haired. Old Grishaka was right when he said life has gone like a flash of lightning. And man gets such a little while to live, yet we must shorten it still more.... Bah, if death comes, let it come soon!"

Darya came up to him. She had recovered very quickly from the loss of Pyotr. For a little while she had mourned, going yellow with grief and seeming to age. But as soon as the spring breezes began to blow and the sun to warm the earth, her grief had passed with the melting snows. A delicate flush had come into her oval cheeks again, her eyes glittered, and her former easy, swinging walk had returned. Her old habits had returned also: she was painting her eyebrows again, her cheeks shone with cream, she had recovered her love of joking, of teasing Natalya with her lewd tongue, and more and more often a misty smile of expectation appeared on her lips. Triumphant life had regained command.

She came up to Grigory, smiling. The scent of cucumber cream came from her handsome face.

"Can I give you any help, Grigory?" she asked.

"What with?"

"Ah, Grisha, how stern you've grown with me, a widow! You never even smile."

"You might go and give Natalya a hand. There's Mishatka over there all dirty with running through the mud."

"And is that my job? You to give them birth, and I to wash them for you? No, thank you. Your Natalya's as fruitful as a rabbit. She'll be giving you ten more before she's finished. And I'd get tired of washing them all."

"Enough, enough! Off with you!"

"Grigory Panteleyevich, you're the only Cossack left in the village just now. Don't drive me away; let me look at your charming black whiskers from a distance at least."

Grigory laughed and tossed his hair back from his perspiring forehead. "I don't know how Pyotr managed to live with you.... You'll always get what you're after, I reckon."

"You needn't be afraid," she replied and, glancing at him with her consuming, half-closed eyes, with feigned alarm she looked behind her at the house. "Supposing Natalya was to come out now! How jealous she is of you! I took one little peep at you today, and her face completely changed. The young women were saying to me yesterday: 'What sort of law is this? There are no Cossacks left in the village, and Grigory's back and won't leave his wife's side. How are we to live? Even if he is wounded, even if there's only half of him left, we'd be glad to have our pleasure of that half. Tell him not to go into the village at night or we'll catch him and he'll suffer for it.' So I told them: 'No, my girls; our Grigory only plays about in other villages, but when he's at home he clings to Natalya's petticoat and won't leave her. He's become a good little boy all of a sudden....'"

"You are a bitch!" Grigory remarked, laughing with amusement. "You've got a tongue like a broomhandle."

"I am what I am. But your lawfully wedded

Natalya, the undefiled, she didn't let you into her bed last night. And serve you right, you randy devil, that'll teach you not to misbehave!"

"Don't meddle in other people's affairs, Darya!"

"I'm not. I only meant to say that your Natalya's a fool. Her husband comes home, and she goes for him and makes a fuss, and lies down all by herself on the chest like a penny piece of gingerbread. I wouldn't deny myself a Cossack if I got the chance; I'd put even a brave fellow like you to fear. . . ." She snapped her teeth, laughed aloud, and went off to the house, her ear-rings glinting as she looked back at the laughing and embarrassed Grigory.

"You were lucky to die when you did, Brother Pyotr," Grigory thought. "That Darya's not a woman but a she-devil, she'd have ridden him to death in any case sooner or later."

Grigory Melekhov spent five days in Tatarsky and sowed several acres of grain for his own and his mother-in-law's family. Then, as soon as his father returned, homesick and lousy, from his regiment, he made ready to go back to his division. Kudinov had secretly informed him of the negotiations being conducted with the command of the Serdobsky Regiment and had asked him to return to the front as soon as possible.

At noon of the day on which Grigory planned to leave Tatarsky for Karginskaya, he led his horse down to the Don to drink. As he dropped down to the water, which had flooded to the very edges of the orchards, he saw Aksinya. It seemed to him that she was deliberately dallying with drawing of water, filling her pails slowly, as though waiting for him to come down. But he quickened his pace and as he came up to her, sad memories passed before him to silvery flight.

She turned as she heard footsteps, and an expression of surprise—surely it was assumed—appeared on her face. But her joy at the meeting and her old pain gave her away. She smiled such a miserable, distracted smile, so unbecoming to her proud face, that Grigory's heart was shaken with pity and love. Stung with yearning,

humbled by memory, he halted his horse and said:

"Good morning, Aksinya dear."

"Good morning."

Aksinya's voice was a strange mixture of surprise, affection and bitterness.

"It's a long time since we last spoke to each other."

"Yes, it's a long time."

"I'd even forgotten the sound of your voice. . . ."

"You forget quickly."

"Was it so quickly?"

Grigory held back the horse pressing against him. Aksinya bowed her head and tried to fish out her pail with the end of the yoke, but could not get it hooked on to the handle. For a minute they stood there in silence. A wild duck whirled over their heads, as though flung from a bowstring. Insatiably licking the chalky soil, the waves beat against the bank. On the farther side the white-breasted billows were coursing through the flooded forest. The wind was laden with spray and the balmy scent of the Don as it strained forward in a mighty flood to its lower reaches.

Grigory turned his eyes from Aksinya to the river. The poplars stood with their pale grey trunks in the water, rocking their naked boughs, and the willows, adorned with virgin catkins, hung over the river in fine green clouds. With a hint of vexation and bitterness in his voice, Grigory asked:

"Well, haven't we anything to talk about? Why are you silent?"

But Aksinya had regained her self-command and, without the quiver of a muscle in her face, she replied:

"It seems we've said all we had to say. . . ."

"Truly?"

"And so it ought to be. A tree only blossoms once a year."

"And you think ours has already blossomed?"

"Don't you?"

"It's strange, somehow. . . ." Grigory let his horse go to the water and, glancing at Aksinya, smiled sadly: "But I just can't tear you out of my heart, Aksinya. Here I've got children growing up, and I'm myself half

grey, and how many years lie like an abyss between us! But I still think of you. In my sleep I see you and I love you still. And sometimes as I'm thinking of you I begin to recall how we lived at Listnitsky's. How we loved each other. . . ! Sometimes as I look back on my life it seems like an empty pocket turned inside out. . . ."

"I too. . . . But I must go . . . we're standing talking. . . ." She resolutely lifted the pails, put her sunburnt hands on the yoke, and was about to climb the slope. But suddenly she turned her face towards Grigory, and her cheeks flushed faintly with a fine, youthful blush:

"It was just here, right by this spot, that our love began, Grigory. Do you remember? The day the Cossacks went off to the training camp it was," she said, smiling, and a cheerful note came into her voice.

"I remember it all!"

As soon as Aksinya reached home and emptied her buckets she went to the mirror and stood staring anxiously at her ageing but still beautiful face. It still retained its wanton and seductive charm, but the autumn of life was beginning to cast fugitive hues over her cheeks, her eyelids were yellowing, rare strands of grey were entwined in her hair, her eyes were dimmed with mournful weariness. She stood staring at the reflection, then turned and threw herself on the bed, weeping such copious, sweet, and alleviating tears as she had not known for many days.

She lay on the bed until evening, then arose, washed, combed her hair, and with feverish haste, like a girl about to be presented to a prospective bridegroom, began to dress. She put on a clean shift, a woollen, claret-coloured skirt, threw a kerchief over her head, glanced at herself in the mirror, and went out.

Darya Melekhova had just finished milking and was carrying the bucket and strainer back to the house when she heard someone calling from the fence:

"Darya!"

"Who's that?"

"It's me, Aksinya! Come into my hut for a minute."

"What do you want me for?"

"I want you badly. Come in, for the love of Christ."

"I'll strain this milk, and then I'll come."

"I'll be waiting for you in the yard."

A few minutes later Darya came out and found Aksinya waiting for her by the Astakhovs' gate. Darya smelled of fresh milk and the cowshed and she was surprised to see Aksinya attired in her holiday clothes.

"You've finished early tonight, neighbour!"

"I haven't much to do now Stepan's away. There's only one cow. . . . I hardly ever cook . . . just a bite now and then, that's all."

"What did you want me for?"

"Come inside for a little while. I have something to ask you." Aksinya's voice trembled. Half guessing the reason for the talk, Darya silently followed her into the kitchen. As soon as she entered, Aksinya, without lighting a light, went straight to her chest, rummaged in it, and then, clutching Darya's hand in her own dry and burning hands, hurriedly slipped a ring on her finger.

"What's this? Not a ring, surely? You're not giving it to me?" Darya exclaimed.

"Yes, it's for you . . . as a keepsake. . . ."

"Is it gold?" Darya inquired in a practical tone, going over to the window and examining the ring on her finger by the dim light of the moon.

"Yes, it's gold. You keep it."

"Well, thank you. What do you want me to do for it?"

"Ask your Grigory—to come to me."

Grigory was finishing his supper; he had put down his spoon and was wiping his moustache with his hand. Feeling someone's foot touching his under the table, he looked up and saw Darya winking at him almost imperceptibly.

"If she's after getting me to take Pyotr's place and says anything to me about it, I'll thrash her. I'll take her into the threshing-floor, tie her skirt round her head, and whip her like a bitch!" he thought fiercely. But, rising from the table, he lit a cigarette and unhurriedly went out to the porch. Darya came out almost immediately after him. As she passed him in the porch,

pressing close to him, she whispered:

"Oh, you swine! Go along—she wants you."

"Who?" Grigory breathed the question.

"She!"

An hour later, when Natalya and the children were asleep, Grigory, his greatcoat buttoned close around him, emerged with Aksinya from the gate of the Astakhovs' yard. They stood silent a moment in the dark side street and went as silently into the steppe, which beckoned with its stillness, its darkness, and the intoxicating fragrance of the young grass. Wrapping her in the folds of his greatcoat, Grigory pressed Aksinya to him and felt her trembling, while her heart beat violently and slowly under her blouse.

Grigory arrived at Karginskaya late in the afternoon. He took over the divisional command next morning and, after glancing through the latest reports from the staff at Vyeshenskaya, and consulting his chief of staff, he resolved on an offensive. The regiments were experiencing a severe shortage of ammunition. It was necessary to obtain it by an attack, to capture it from the Reds, and this was the prime cause for Grigory's decision.

Since the battle in which he had killed the sailors Grigory had lived in a state of numb indifference. He went about with head hanging despondently, without a smile. The only thing left to him in life (or so it seemed to him) was his passion for Aksinya, which had returned with new and unrelenting strength. She alone beckoned him to herself, as a distant, flickering camp-fire in the steppe beckons a traveller through the freezing darkness of an autumn night.

Now as he returned from headquarters he thought of Aksinya: "We're going to try to break through, but what about her?" And without hesitation he decided: "Natalya will stay behind with the children, with Mother, but I'll take Aksinya with me. I'll get her a horse and she can ride with my staff."

He crossed the Don to Bazki. As soon as he got to his quarters, he tore a page from his notebook and wrote:

"Aksinya, we may have to retreat to the left side of

the Don. If so, leave everything and ride to Vyeshenskaya. Look for me there; you will go with me."

He folded the note and sealed it with cherry gum, gave it to Prokhor Zykov, and, flushing, concealing his embarrassment under an unnecessary sternness, told him:

"Ride to Tatarsky and give this note to Aksinya Astakhova. See that none of my people notices you give it to her. Better take it at night. Don't wait for an answer. And afterwards you can have two days' furlough. Off with you!"

On her arrival in Vyeshenskaya, Aksinya went to stay with an aunt living on the outskirts not far from the new church. She spent all the first day looking for Grigory, but he had not arrived in Vyeshenskaya. The whole of the following day bullets were whistling and shells bursting in the streets, and she could not pluck up sufficient resolution to leave the house.

"He told me to come to Vyeshenskaya, promised we'd be together, and now he's gone off the devil knows where!" she thought angrily, biting her vivid yet fading lips as she lay on a chest in the best room. Her old aunt sat at the window, knitting a stocking and crossing herself after each shot.

"Oh, Lord Jesus! It's terrible, terrible! And what are they fighting for? What have they got against each other?" she whimpered, as the window-glass scattered with a jangle over the floor.

"Aunt! Come away from the window; you may be hit," Aksinya begged her. The old woman stared quizzically at her under her spectacles and replied in an annoyed tone:

"Aksinya, you're a fool! Am I an enemy of theirs? Why should they fire at me?"

"You may get killed by accident. They can't see where their bullets are going."

"Kill me, will they! Can't see who they're shooting at, eh? They're shooting at the Cossacks; the Cossacks are their enemies. I'm old and a widow; what should they want to shoot me for? I expect they know

who they're aiming at with their rifles and cannons."

At noon Grigory galloped down the street, bending close over his horse's neck. Aksinya saw him from the window and ran out into the creeper-covered porch, crying: "Grisha!" But Grigory had already disappeared round the corner, leaving the dust to settle gently on the road. It was useless to run after him. She stood on the steps weeping angry tears.

"That wasn't Stepan galloped by? What did you run out for like a mad thing?" her aunt asked her.

"It was one of our villagers," Aksinya replied through her tears.

"But what are you crying for?" the inquisitive old woman questioned her.

"What do you want to know for? It's not your business."

"Oh, so it's not my business! Then it was a sweetheart of yours galloped past. You wouldn't have cried out like that for nothing. I've not lived all these years to no purpose."

Towards evening Prokhor Zykov entered the hut. Aksinya was in the best room at the time, and at the sound of Prokhor's voice she ran out, gladly crying: "Prokhor!"

"Well, girl, you've given me a fine hunt," he remarked. "I've worn my feet out looking for you. He's as mad as can be! Firing going on everywhere, and every living soul hiding himself, and all he says is: 'Find her or you'll be finding a grave!'"

Aksinya seized Prokhor by the shirt sleeve and drew him into the porch. "Where is he, the devil?" she demanded.

"Hm! Where isn't he? He came back from the front line on his own feet. They'd killed the horse under him. He came back as ill-tempered as a bitch on a chain. 'Found her?' he asked. 'Where am I to find her?' I answered. 'I can't give birth to her.' And he said: 'A woman can't be lost like a needle!' The way he roared at me! He's a wolf in man's form. But come on!"

In a minute Aksinya had tied up her little bundle

and hurriedly said good-bye to her aunt.

"Stepan sent for you?" the old woman asked.

"Yes, Aunt."

"Well, give him my love. Why didn't he drop in himself? He could have had some milk and those dumplings that are left over. . . ."

Aksinya ran out of the house without listening to her aunt's parting remarks. She hurried along the street so fast that she began to pant and turned pale. At last Prokhor had even to ask her to go more slowly.

In the kitchen of a hut with fast-closed shutters a candle was burning smokily. Grigory was sitting at the table. He had just finished cleaning his rifle and was rubbing the barrel of his pistol when the door scraped and Aksinya stood on the threshold. Her pale, narrow brow was damp with sweat, and her dilated, angry eyes burned with such frantic passion in her white face that Grigory's heart quivered joyously as he looked at her.

"You send for me to come here—and then you vanish," she said, panting heavily. For her nothing existed at that moment except Grigory, as once long ago, in the first days of their love. Once more the whole world died when Grigory was absent and was reborn when he was near her. Heedless of Prokhor, she threw herself towards him, twined herself round him like wild hops, and kissed her lover's scrubby cheeks, printing tiny kisses on his nose, his brow, his eyes, his lips, whispering incoherently, weeping, and sobbing:

"I wore myself out.... Oh, how I've suffered, Grisha dearest, my blood, my life!"

"Well, now! You see now... but wait... Aksinya, stop it!" Grigory muttered in his embarrassment, turning his face and avoiding Prokhor's eyes. He seated her on the bench, removed the shawl from her head, and stroked her dishevelled hair.

"You are—" he began.

"I'm the same as always. But you—"

"No, by God, you—you're a mad one!"

She put her arms round his shoulders, laughed through her tears, and whispered hurriedly:

"Well, how could you! You called me. I came on foot, left everything, and then you weren't here. You galloped past and I ran out and shouted after you, but you'd already turned the corner. They might have killed you, and then I shouldn't have had a last sight of you."

She said something else to him, something ineffably tender, womanly and foolish, all the time stroking his bowed shoulders, staring into his eyes with her own humble eyes. Something in her gaze was so wistfully wretched, yet so harshly desperate, like the eyes of a hunted animal, that it was painful and embarrassing for Grigory to look at her. He dropped his lashes, smiled forcedly, and was silent, while the blush deepened and deepened on her cheeks and her pupils seemed to become veiled in a smoky blue haze.

For two days they lived as in a dream, confusing day and night, oblivious of all around them. Occasionally Grigory awoke after a brief, stupefying sleep and saw Aksinya's attentive eyes fixed on him in the twilight as though she were learning his features by heart. She usually lay resting on her elbow, her palm supporting her cheek, and gazed almost unwinkingly.

"What are you staring at?" Grigory asked.

"I want to look my fill of you. They'll kill you; my heart tells me so."

"Well, if it tells you that, stare on!" Grigory smiled.

On the third day he went outside for the first time since her arrival. Kudinov had sent messenger after messenger asking him to come to the staff for a conference, but he had sent them back with the message that the conference could be held without him. Prokhor had obtained a fresh mount for him from the staff and had ridden by night to the trenches and brought back his saddle. Now, seeing Grigory preparing to go out, Aksinya asked in alarm:

"Where are you going?"

"I want to ride to Tatarsky to see how our men are defending the village and to find out where my family is," he replied.

"Missing your children?" With a shiver she wrapped her brown shoulders in a shawl.

"Yes."

"Grigory, don't go, will you?" she pleaded, and her eyes began to glitter feverishly in their dark sockets. "Is your family more dear to you than I am? Is it? You're drawn this way and that. Why don't you take me as well, Natalya and I will get on together somehow.... Well, go, then! But don't come back to me! I won't have you back! I don't want to be treated like that. I won't!"

Grigory silently went out into the yard and mounted his horse.

Grigory reached his village meadowland early in the evening. Everything here was familiar, every tree gave rise to memories.... The road ran through the Virgin Glade, where every year on St. Peter's Day the Cossacks drank vodka after dividing up the meadowland. He passed Alexei's Wood, running like a headland out into the meadows. Long years ago in this wood wolves had attacked a cow belonging to a Tatarsky Cossack named Alexei. Alexei had died long since; even the memory of him had been worn away as the inscription is worn of a tombstone, and his surname was forgotten by his neighbours and kinsmen; but the wood named after him still stretched its dark green crowns of oaks and elms to heaven. Here the Tatarsky Cossacks came to cut down the trees for fashioning domestic articles, but each spring vital young shoots arose round the old stumps, then there would be a year or two of imperceptible growth, and once more Alexei's Wood would spread its green branches in summer, and in autumn wear a golden mantle of frost-nipped oak-leaves.

In summer the prickly blackberry bushes twined thickly over the damp earth, gaily feathered woodpeckers and magpies built their nests in the crowns of the old cork elms; in autumn, when the air was bracing and sharp with the smell of acorns and fallen oak-leaves, migrating woodcocks visited the little wood, but in winter only the round footprint of the fox stretched its

jewelled thread over the white coverlet of snow. Grigory had often been to Alexei's Wood in winter to set traps for the foxes.

Grigory rode under the cool shade of the branches along an old track, now overgrown. He passed through the Virgin Glade and made his way up to the Black Cliff, with memories rushing to his head like wine. There were the three poplars where, as a boy, he had often hunted wild young ducklings; by the Round Pond he had sat fishing with a line from dawn to dusk. A little farther on stood a lonely old guelder-rose bush. It was visible from the Melekhov yard, and every autumn Grigory had stood on the steps of the house and delighted in the sight of the bush. From a distance it looked as though it was burning with a crimson flame. His dead brother Pyotr had been very fond of pies made with the bitter guelder berries.

With a quiet melancholy in his heart Grigory looked around the haunts of his childhood. His horse went at a walking pace, lazily driving the gadflies and mosquitoes off with its tail. The grasses gently bowed before the breeze, and the meadowland rippled with speckled shadows.

He rode to the trenches occupied by the Tatarsky infantry company and sent for his father. Summoned by Christonya, old Pantelei came limping along hurriedly.

"Well, greetings, chief!" the old man called to him as he came up.

"Hullo, Father!"

"Come to visit us?"

"I could hardly get away. Well, how are our people? Where's Mother and Natalya?"

Pantelei waved his hand and his face puckered. A tear trickled down his swarthy cheek.

"Why, what's the matter? What's happened?" Grigory asked sharply and anxiously.

"They haven't crossed the river...."

"Why not?"

"Natalya has been lying in bed these two days—typhus, it looks like. And the old woman wouldn't leave her

behind. But don't be alarmed, my son; they're all right."

"And the children? Misha? Polya?"

"They're there too. But Dunya came across. She was afraid to stay behind—a single girl, you know. She went off with Anikushka's wife. I've already been home twice. I crossed the river quietly by night in a boat and visited them. Natalya's very bad, but the children are well, praise be! Natalya's unconscious; she was so hot the blood had caked on her lips."

"Why didn't you bring her over to this side?" Grigory exclaimed angrily.

The old man grew annoyed, and resentment and reproach sounded in his quavering voice as he answered:

"And what were you doing? Couldn't you have come here to get them?"

"I've got a division under me. I had to see to the crossing of my division," Grigory protested hotly.

"We've heard of your goings-on in Vyeshenskaya. You don't seem to need your family any more.... Ah, Grigory, if you're not ready to think of your own people, you should think more of God. I didn't cross the river here, or do you think I wouldn't have brought them? My troop was in Yelanskaya, and by the time we reached here the Reds had entered Tatarsky."

"What I was doing in Vyeshenskaya is nothing to do with you! And don't you...." Grigory's voice was hoarse and muffled.

For another half-hour Grigory stood talking with his father, then went to his horse. The old man had made no further reference to Aksinya, but even so Grigory was depressed. "Everybody must have heard if Father knows," he thought. "Who told them? Who else except Prokhor saw us together? Surely Stepan doesn't know too?" He ground his teeth in shame and annoyance with himself.

He talked briefly with the Cossacks. Anikushka kept joking and asking for a few buckets of vodka for the squadron.

"Never mind the cartridges as long as you send vodka!" he said, laughing and flicking his throat express-

ively with his finger-nail.

Grigory treated Christonya and his other fellow-villagers to the tobacco he had brought with him. Just as he was about to mount his horse he saw Stepan Astakhov coming up. Stepan approached unhurriedly and exchanged greetings, but did not offer his hand.

It was the first time Grigory had seen him since the uprising started and he stared at him anxiously and searchingly. "Does he know?" he wondered. But Stepan's handsome face was untroubled and even cheerful, and Grigory sighed with relief.

Natalya straightened her back with difficulty, leaned her mattock against the wattle fence, and, noticing Darya, went to meet her.

"Do you want me, Darya?"

"I've come to you with my trouble...."

They sat down side by side. Natalya took off her kerchief, tidied her hair, and glanced expectantly at Darya. She was amazed at the change which had occurred in Darya's face during the past few days: her cheeks were sunken and grey, a deep frown knitted her forehead, there was a feverish, anxious glitter in her eyes.

"What's the matter with you? You've gone quite dark in the face," Natalya asked sympathetically.

"You'd go dark in my place." Darya forced a smile, then was silent. "Have you got much more to hoe?"

"I'll be finished by evening. But what has happened to you?"

Darya swallowed convulsively and answered in a quick mutter:

"I'll tell you what. I'm ill. I've got a filthy disease.... I caught it when I went on that last journey.... Some accursed officer gave it to me!"

"So you've paid for your pleasure!" Natalya clapped her hands in fear and distress.

"Yes, I've paid for it.... And there's nothing to be said, and nobody to complain of.... It's just my weakness.... The swine made up to me, soft-soaped me.... He had white teeth, but he was rotten inside.... And now

I'm finished!"

"Poor darling! But now what? Now what are you going to do?" Natalya stared at Darya with dilated eyes, while Darya, gazing down at her feet, recovered her composure and went on more calmly:

"You see, even on the way back I began to notice things. At first I thought maybe it was just... you know yourself that women have all sorts of troubles. Last spring I lifted a sack of wheat from the ground, and it made me bleed for three weeks. Well, but afterwards I realized that it wasn't quite the same this time.... The signs appeared.... And yesterday I went to see the doctor at the district centre. I could have died with shame.... But it's all over now.... The good girl has got her reward!"

"You must get cured of it, only it's such a disgrace. They say that sort of disease can be cured."

"No, girl, you can't cure mine." Darya smiled wryly, and she lifted her burning eyes for the first time during the talk. "I've got syphilis, and there's no cure for that. Your nose drops off with that.... Like old Mother Andronikha—have you ever seen her?"

"Now what will you do?" Natalya asked in a weeping voice, and her eyes filled with tears.

Darya sat silent for a long time. She tore a convolvulus flower from the maize stalk around which it had entwined itself, and raised it close to her eyes. The tender, rosy-fringed trumpet of the tiny flower, so translucently light, almost imponderable, gave off the heavy, fleshy perfume of sun-drenched earth. Darya stared at it eagerly and curiously, as though she had never seen the common little flower before, smelled it with twitching nostrils, then laid it carefully on the wind-dried, crumbling earth and said:

"What shall I do, you ask? As I came back from the district centre I was thinking and planning all the way.... I'll lay hands on myself; that's what I'll do. It's a pity, but there seems to be no other way out. It doesn't matter if I do try to get cured, everybody in the village will find out; they'll all point their finger at me, they'll all turn their backs and laugh. Who will want me in the state I

am now? My beauty will fade, I shall go all withered, I shall rot alive. . . . And I don't want that!" She spoke as though she were discussing the question with herself and paid no heed to Natalya's gesture of protest. "Before I went to Vyeshenskaya I thought that if I had got a filthy disease I'd get cured. . . . But now I've changed my mind. And I'm fed up with it all. I don't want to get cured."

Darya swore a terrible, masculine oath, spat, and with the back of her hand wiped away a tear hanging on her long eye-lashes.

"The things you're saying! You ought to be afraid of God. . . ." Natalya said quietly.

"God—He's no use to me now. As it is, He's got in my way all my life. . . ." Darya smiled; and in that smile, mischievous and sly, for one second Natalya recognized the old Darya. "You couldn't do this, and you couldn't do that; everybody frightened you out of sinning with talk of the Day of Judgement. . . . But you couldn't think of anything more terrible than the judgement I'm going to carry out on myself. I'm fed up with it all, Natalya. Everybody's turned horrible. . . . It'll be easy for me to do away with myself. I've got nobody behind me or before me. And nobody to tear out of my heart. . . . But it's true!"

Natalya argued ardently; pleaded with Darya to think it over and to put the thought of suicide out of her mind. But Darya, who listened abstractedly at first, collected herself and angrily interrupted:

"Drop all that, Natalya! I haven't come here for you to talk me out of it and plead with me. I came to tell you about my trouble and to warn you that from today on, you mustn't let your children come near me. My disease is catching, so the doctor says, and I've heard say it is myself, and I don't want them to catch it from me. Don't you see, stupid? And you tell the old woman, I haven't got the courage. . . . But I—I'm not going to put my head in a noose at once, don't think that; there's plenty of time for that. . . . I'll live a little longer and enjoy myself in the world, taking my farewell of it. You know what we're like. So long as there's no

tugging at our heart we go on blindly. . . . Look at the life I've lived. I've been sort of blind; but as I was coming back from Vyeshenskaya along by the Don, and as I thought that soon I would have to leave all this, it was as though my eyes had been opened. I looked at the Don, and it was all rippling, and in the sunlight it was pure silver, and dancing so that it made my eyes smart to look at it. I turned all round and looked. . . . Lord, how beautiful it all was! And yet I'd never noticed it before. . . ." Darya smiled shamefacedly and was silent. She clenched her fists and, choking down the sob that rose in her throat, began to speak again, in a still higher and more strained voice. "On the way here I'd cried more than once. . . . And as I came near the village I looked and saw the children bathing in the river. . . . And as I looked at them my heart suddenly ached, and I started crying, like a fool. I lay a couple of hours on the sand to get over it. It's not easy for me if I stop to think. . . ."

She rose from the ground, shook out her skirt, and with a habitual movement adjusted the kerchief on her head.

"The only joy I get when I think of death is that in the next world I shall see Pyotr again. . . . 'Well!' I shall say, 'my old friend, Pyotr Panteleyevich, take back your wanton wife.' " With her customary cynical facetiousness, she added: "But he won't be able to beat me in that world; they don't let quarrelsome ones into heaven, do they? Well, good-bye, Natalya dear! Don't forget to tell Mother about my trouble."

Natalya sat covering her eyes with her dusty palms. Between her fingers tears glittered like resin in splinters of pine. Darya reached the plaited wattle gate, then turned and said in a businesslike tone:

"From today on I shall eat from separate dishes. Tell Mother so. Oh, yes, and one other thing: tell her she's not to say anything to Father about it, or the old man will go mad and turn me out of the house. And that would be the last straw. I'm going straight out to the mowing now. Good-bye!"

The mowers returned from the steppe next day.

Pantelei decided to start carting in the hay after dinner. Dunya drove the bullocks down to the Don for water, and Ilyinichna and Natalya swiftly laid the table.

Darya came last to the table and sat down at the end. Ilyinichna set a small plate of cabbage soup before her, put a spoon and a piece of bread before her, and, as usual, poured the soup for the others into the one large, common bowl.

Pantelei stared at his wife in surprise, indicated Darya's plate with his eyes, and asked:

"What's all that? Why have you poured out her soup separate? Isn't she any longer of our faith?"

"What ever do you want? Get on with your food!"

The old man gave Darya a humorous look and smiled. "What's the matter, Darya? Turning up your nose at supping out of the one bowl with us?"

"No, I'm not turning up my nose. I mustn't," Darya answered huskily.

"And why not?"

"My throat hurts."

"Well, and what of it?"

"I went to Vyeshenskaya to see the doctor, and he said I was to eat out of a separate dish."

"I had a sore throat once, but I didn't keep away from everybody else, and, glory be, I didn't give it to anybody else. So what sort of chill have you got?"

Darya turned pale, wiped her lips with her hand, and laid down her spoon. Angered by her husband's tactlessness, Ilyinichna shouted at him:

"What are you plaguing the woman for? We get no peace from you even at the table! He sticks like a bur, and there's no getting away from him!"

"But what's all the fuss about?" Pantelei barked irritably. "For all I care, you can do what you like."

In his annoyance he poured a spoonful of hot soup into his throat, burned himself, and, spitting out the soup all over his beard, roared madly:

"You don't know how to serve up food properly, curse the lot of you! Who ever serves up soup straight from the fire?"

"If you were to talk less at the table the soup wouldn't

burn you," Ilyinichna consoled him.

Dunya almost burst into laughter as she watched her father, his face a vivid purple, pick the cabbage and pieces of potato out of his beard. But everybody else was so straight-faced that she refrained and turned her eyes away, for fear of laughing at an awkward moment.

After dinner the old man and both his daughters-in-law drove off to bring in the hay. Pantelei passed the hay on a long pitchfork up to the wagon, while Natalya took the fusty-smelling pile and trod it down. She and Darya returned from the field together. Pantelei had driven on far ahead with his old, long-striding bullocks.

The sun was setting behind the mound. The bitter wormwood scent arising from the mown steppe grew stronger towards evening, yet at the same time it grew milder, more pleasant, and lost the choking pungency it had had during the day. The heat was declining. The bullocks moved willingly and the heavy dust of the summer track thrown up by their hoofs rose and settled on the clumps of wayside thistles. The thistle heads with their flowering crimson crowns flamed brilliantly. Over them the bees were hovering. Lapwings flew off to a distant pond in the steppe, calling to one another as they went.

Darya lay face downward on the swaying wagon, resting on her elbows, occasionally glancing at Natalya. Lost in thought, Natalya was gazing at the sunset; coppery-crimson gleams roved over her calm, clear face. "But Natalya's happy; she's got a husband and children, there's nothing more she wants. Everybody in the family loves her. But as for me, I'm finished. When I die nobody will shed a tear." As Darya thought enviously of her sister-in-law she suddenly felt a desire stirring within her to embitter Natalya somehow, to cause her pain. Why had she, Darya, got to be the only one to struggle with attacks of despair, to think incessantly of her ruined life and suffer so cruelly? She took another swift glance at Natalya and said in a tone which she tried to make sound sincere:

"I want to make a confession to you, Natalya."

Natalya did not reply at once. Gazing at the sunset,

she was recalling that day long ago when she was still Grigory's betrothed, and he had come to her home to see her. When he left she had gone out to the gate to see him off. That day also the sunset had flamed, a raspberry-coloured afterglow had spread in the west, and the rooks had been calling in the willows. Grigory had ridden away half-turned in his saddle, and she had gazed after him through tears of joyous agitation and, pressing her hands to her pointed, virgin breasts, had felt the violent beating of her heart. . . . She was not pleased when Darya suddenly broke the silence, and she reluctantly asked:

"Why, what have you got to confess?"

"I've committed a sin. . . . Do you remember when Grigory came home from the front on leave? On the evening of that day, I remember, I was milking the cow. As I went to the hut I heard Aksinya calling me. Well, she called me over and gave me this little ring, simply forced it on me"—Darya turned the gold ring on her ring-finger—"and coaxed me into sending Grigory to her. Well, it was none of my business. . . . And I told him. All that night he. . . . Do you remember he said Kudinov had come and he had sat talking with him? It was all nonsense! He was with Aksinya."

Natalya sat benumbed, white-faced, silently breaking a dry piece of clover in her hands.

"Don't be angry with me, Natalya. I'm sorry now that I told you," Darya said humbly, trying to look into Natalya's eyes.

Natalya silently choked back her tears. So unexpected and oppressive was the sorrow which had again come upon her that she had no strength to answer Darya and only turned away to hide her distorted face.

As they drove into the village Darya thought in her vexation with herself: "The devil must have egged me on to peck at her! Now she'll stream with tears for a whole month! I should have let her go on without knowing. It's better for such cows to live in their blindness." Desiring to soften the impression her words had made, she said:

"But don't you be too upset. What is that to sigh

about? My trouble is heavier than yours, but I keep my chin up. And the devil knows—after all he might not have been with her at all really, perhaps he did go to see Kudinov. I didn't follow him, and if you're not caught you're not a thief."

"I guessed where he'd gone," Natalya said quietly, wiping her eyes with the corner of her kerchief.

"But if you guessed, why didn't you ask him about it? Ah, you good-for-nothing! He wouldn't have wriggled away from me! I'd have got him into such a corner that he'd have felt sick!"

"I was afraid to know the truth. . . . Do you think it's easy to bear?" Natalya said, stammering with emotion. Her eyes flashed. "You might have. . . lived like that with Pyotr. . . . But when I remember—when I remember all I've had to—had to go through—it's terrible to bear even now."

"Well, then, forget it all!" Darya naïvely counselled her.

"That's not the sort of thing you ever forget!" Natalya exclaimed in a strange, husky voice.

"I'd forget it! A lot of fuss over nothing!"

"You forget your disease!"

Darya burst into a laugh.

"I'd love to, but it won't let me, curse it! Listen, Natalya, if you like I'll find it all out from Aksinya. She'll tell me. God punish me! There isn't a woman alive who could keep quiet and not tell others who loves her and how. I know from my own case."

"I don't want your service! You've already done me one service!" Natalya answered dryly. "I'm not blind, I know why you told me all about it. It wasn't because you were sorry for me that you confessed, as you make out, you wanted to see me more unhappy. . . ."

"You're right," Darya assented with a sigh. "But you judge for yourself: I'm not the only one who ought to suffer, am I?"

She slipped down from the wagon, took the bullock-rein in her hand, and led the wearily shambling animals down the hill. At the entrance to their lane she went up to the wagon and said:

"Natalya dear, there's one thing I want to ask you . . . Do you love your man very much?"

"As best I can," Natalya answered indefinitely.

"So you do!" Darya sighed. "But I've never happened to love anyone very much. I've loved as a dog loves, here, there and everywhere. I wish I could have my life over again, I might live it different."

Black night followed the short summer gloaming. They stacked the hay in the yard in the darkness. The women worked without talking, and Darya made no retort even when Pantelei shouted at her.

For several days after her talk with Darya, Natalya suffered as one does in sleep, when oppressed by a bad dream and unable to awake. She sought a plausible excuse for visiting Prokhor Zykov's wife and trying to find out from her how Grigory had lived at Vyeshenskaya during the retreat and whether he had seen Aksinya there or not. She wanted to be convinced of her husband's misdoings, for she both believed and disbelieved Darya's story.

It was late in the evening when she made her way to the Zykov's yard, unconcernedly waving a small twig in her hand. Her work finished for the day, Prokhor's wife was sitting by the gate.

"Hullo, soldier's wife!" Natalya called. "Have you seen our calf?"

"Glory be, my dear! No, I haven't seen it."

"He's such a wanderer, curse him! He won't stay at home at all! I can't think where to look for him."

"Stop and have a rest; he'll turn up. Would you like some sunflower seeds?"

Natalya went and sat down beside her. They fell into women's artless talk.

"Any news of your soldier?" Natalya inquired.

"Not a word. Seems to have vanished into thin air, the Antichrist! Has yours sent any news?"

"No. Grisha promised to write, but so far he hasn't sent one letter. They say our troops have got beyond Ust-Medveditskaya, but I haven't heard anything else." Natalya shifted the conversation to talk of the recent

retreat across the Don and cautiously began to ask how the soldiers had lived in Vyeshenskaya and whether any of the village people had been there. Prokhor's crafty wife guessed what Natalya had come to see her about, and her answers were restrained and curt.

Her husband had told her all about Grigory, but although her tongue was itching to wag, she was afraid to say anything, remembering Prokhor's admonition: "You mark my words: if you say a word of what I've told you I'll put your head down on the chopping-block, pull your tongue out a yard, and chop it off. If any rumour of this reaches Grigory he'll kill me without thinking twice about it. I may be fed up with you, but I'm not fed up with life yet, understand? So keep your mouth shut. . . ."

"Your Prokhor didn't happen to see Aksinya Astakhova in Vyeshenskaya?" Natalya asked outright, losing all patience.

"Why should he have seen her? Do you think he had time for that there? God's truth, I know nothing, Mironovna, and you mustn't even ask me about it. You can't get any sense out of my white-headed devil. All he can say is do this, do that."

When Natalya left her she was even more vexed and agitated. But she could remain no longer in ignorance, and she was driven on to go and see Aksinya herself.

Living next door to one another, they had met frequently of recent years. On such occasions they would silently bow or sometimes pass a few remarks. The days when they had refused to greet each other and had exchanged hateful glances were gone; their mutual hostility had lost its original asperity, and when she went to see Aksinya, Natalya hoped she would not drive her away and would want to talk about Grigory. She was not mistaken in her expectations.

Making no attempt to hide her astonishment, Aksinya invited Natalya into the best room, pulled the curtains, lit the lamp, and asked:

"What good news has brought you here?"

"I have no cause to come with good news to you. . . ."

"Tell me the bad news then. Has anything happened

to Grigory Panteleyevich?"

There was such deep, unconcealed anxiety in Aksinya's question that Natalya realized all. In one phrase Aksinya had revealed all herself, all she lived for and all her fears. After that there was really no need to ask about her relations with Grigory. Yet Natalya did not go, and after a momentary hesitation, she said: "No, my husband's alive and well; don't be alarmed!"

"I'm not alarmed; why should you think so? It's for you to worry about his health; I've troubles enough of my own." Aksinya spoke easily, but, feeling the blood rushing to her face, she swiftly went to the table. Standing with her back to her visitor, she spent a long time adjusting the lamp wick, although it was already burning quite well.

"Is there any news of your Stepan?"

"He sent me his greetings recently."

"Is he well?"

"It seems so." Aksinya shrugged her shoulders.

Again she could not be false to herself or dissemble her feelings; her unconcern for the fate of her husband was so obvious that Natalya involuntarily smiled.

"I can see you don't worry very much about him. . . . But that's your business. This is what I've come for: there's talk going round the village that Grigory's making up to you again, and that you see him when he comes home. Is it true?"

"You've come to the right person to ask!" Aksinya said in a jeering tone. "Suppose I ask you whether it's true?"

"Are you afraid to tell the truth?"

"No, I'm not."

"Then tell me, so that I know and don't go on tormenting myself. Why should I get upset over nothing?"

Aksinya's dark brows twitched as she narrowed her eyes.

"In any case you won't get any pity from me," she said sharply. "It's like this between you and me: when I'm miserable, you're glad; and when you're miserable, I'm glad. . . . For we share the same man, don't we? Well, I'll tell you the truth, so that you may know in good

me. It's all true, they're not talking nonsense. I've won Grigory again, and this time I shall do my best not to let him slip out of my hands. And now what are you going to do? Smash the windows of my house, or stab me with a knife?"

Natalya tied the flexible switch in her hand into a knot, threw it towards the stove, and answered with an unnatural firmness:

"I shall do no wrong to you now. I shall wait until Grigory comes back and have a talk with him. And then we shall see what I'm going to do about the pair of you. I've got two children, and I shall know how to stand up for them and for myself, too!"

Aksinya smiled and answered:

"So for the present I can live without fear of anything?"

Not noticing the sneer, Natalya went up to Aksinya and touched her by the sleeve.

"Aksinya, all my life you've stood in my way, but now I shall not plead as I did once before, you remember? Then I was younger, stupider; I thought: 'I'll plead with her and she'll have pity, she'll soften her heart and give Grigory up.' I shan't this time. One thing I know: you don't love him, you only hanker after him out of habit. Did you ever love him like I do? It doesn't look like it. You played about with Listnitsky, and who haven't you played about with, you flirt? When a woman loves a man she doesn't do that."

Aksinya turned pale; pushing Natalya away, she rose from the chest.

"He never reproached me with that. But you do! And what business is it of yours? All right! I'm bad and you're good. What of it?"

"That's all. Don't be angry. I'm going now. Thank you for telling me the truth."

"Don't bother to thank me; you'd have found out without my help. Wait a bit; I'll come out with you and close the shutters."

In the porch Aksinya halted and said:

"I'm glad we part in peace, without a fight. But I tell you, dear neighbour, that so far as the future is

concerned, it's going to be like this. If you've got the strength, take him; but if you haven't, don't be offended. I shan't willingly give him up any more than you will. I'm not so young now, and though you called me a flirt, I'm not your Darya. In all my life I have never played about where such things are concerned. You've got children, but to me he's—" Aksinya's voice quivered, and went huskier and deeper. "He's all I care for in the whole world. He's my first and my last. But let's not talk about him any more. If he comes through alive, if the Queen of Heaven saves him from death and he comes back, then he'll choose for himself. . . ."

That night Natalya could not sleep. Next morning she went with Ilyinichna to weed the melons. She found things easier to bear when she was working. Her mind was not so occupied with the one thought as she steadily brought the hoe down on the clods of sandy, sun-dried, crumbling clay. Occasionally she straightened her back to rest, to wipe the sweat from her face and to take a drink.

White clouds, tousled and torn by the wind, were floating and melting across the blue sky. The sun's rays beat down on the scorching earth. Rain was approaching from the east. Without raising her head Natalya could feel when a floating cloud covered the sun. She felt a momentary coolness on her back; a grey shadow hurried over the brown, hot earth, over the tangle of water-melon tendrils. It covered the melons scattered over the slope, the grasses limp and flattened with heat, the bushes of hawthorn and bramble with their dismal-looking foliage sprinkled with bird-droppings. The yearning cry of the quails grew louder, the pleasant song of the skylarks came more distinctly to the ear, and even the wind stirring the warm grasses seemed less sultry. But then the sun would pierce the dazzling white edge of the cloud as it floated westward and, freeing itself from its net, once more throw slanting, sparkling golden torrents of light down to the earth. Somewhere a long way off, on the azure spurs of the Don-side hills, the blotchy shadow of the retreating

cloud was still groping over the earth. But in the melon-patches the amber-yellow noontide reigned once more, the fluid haze quivered and danced on the horizon, and the earth and the grasses it fed smelled still more pungently.

At noon Natalya went to a spring in the cliff and brought back a pitcher of icy water. She and Ilyinichna drank their fill, washed their hands, and sat down in the sun to eat their dinner. Ilyinichna spread out a kerchief and neatly cut up bread on it. She took spoons and a cup out of the bag and drew a narrow-necked ewer of sour milk from under her jacket, where she had hidden it away from the sun.

Natalya ate poorly, and her mother-in-law asked: "I've noticed for some time that you've changed somehow. . . . Has anything gone wrong between you and Grisha?"

Natalya's weathered lips quivered miserably. "He's going with Aksinya again, Mother."

"What—how do you know?"

"I went to see her yesterday."

"And did she admit it, the hussy?"

"Yes."

Ilyinichna was silent, thinking. Her lined face set sternly, the corners of her lips drew down grimly.

"Maybe she's only bragging, curse her."

"No, Mother, it's true. Why should she. . . ?"

"You haven't kept your eye on him. . . ." the old woman said tentatively. "You can't take your eyes off that sort of husband."

"But how can anyone keep her eyes on him? I relied on his conscience. . . . Had I got to tie him to my apron strings?" Natalya smiled bitterly, and added almost inaudibly: "He's not Mishatka, to be kept in order like a child. He's gone grey quite a lot, but he doesn't forget the past. . . ."

Ilyinichna washed and wiped the spoons, rinsed out the cup, collected the utensils in the bag, and only then asked:

"Is that all the trouble?"

"You are strange, Mother! That one trouble's

enough to make life miserable."

"And what are you thinking of doing?"

"What is there I can do? I'll take the children and go to my own people. I shan't live with him any longer. Let him take her into his home and live with her.... I've been tortured enough already."

"I thought like that, too, when I was young," Ilyinichna said with a sigh. "My man was a dog, too, there's no gainsaying it. I couldn't tell you all I suffered through him. Only it isn't easy to leave your own husband; and besides, what's the use of it? You think it out a bit more and you'll see that for yourself. And how can you take the children away from their father? No, you're talking nonsense. You're not even to think of it; I shan't allow it!"

"Well, Mother, I shan't live with him, so don't waste your breath."

"What do you mean by 'don't waste your breath'?" Ilyinichna took offence at the remark. "Aren't you my daughter then? Am I sorry for the accursed pair of you or not? And you can say such things to me, to your mother, to an old woman? I've told you to put it right out of your head, and that's enough! Pah! 'I'll leave home,' she says. But where will you go? Who of your own people wants you? You've got no father, your house is burned down, your own mother is glad to Christ to live in someone else's house. And yet you're going off to her and want to drag my grandchildren with you? No, my dear, that won't do! We'll see what to do with Grisha when he comes back; but now you're not even to talk to me about it. I won't have it, and I don't want to hear another word about it!"

All the pain that had been accumulating for so long in Natalya's heart suddenly broke out in a convulsive fit of sobbing. With a groan she tore the kerchief from her head, fell face downward on the dry, ungracious earth, and, pressing her breast to the ground, sobbed on and on without tears.

Ilyinichna—wise and brave old woman that she was—did not even stir from where she was sitting. After a while she carefully wrapped the ewer with the rest of

the milk in it in her jacket, laid it aside in a cool spot, then poured water into the cup and sat down beside Natalya. She knew that words were of no help in such sorrow; she knew, too, that tears were better than dry eyes and firmly pressed lips. She let Natalya weep till she could weep no more, then laid her work-worn hand on her daughter-in-law's head. Stroking the black, lustrous hair, she said sternly:

"Well, that's enough! Don't use up all your tears, leave some for another time. Here, take a drink of water."

Natalya quietened down. Her shoulders still heaved occasionally and a fine trembling possessed her body. Unexpectedly she jumped up, pushed Ilyinichna aside, and, turning her face eastward, putting her tear-stained palms together in prayer, hurriedly, sobbingly screamed:

"Lord! He's tortured my soul to death! I haven't the strength to go on living like this. Lord, punish him, curse him! Strike him dead! May he live no longer, torture me no longer!"

A black, rolling cloud crawled onward from the east. Thunder rumbled hollowly. Piercing the precipitous cloudy masses, a burning white flash of lightning writhed and slipped over the sky. The wind bent the murmuring grass westward, sent a pungent dust flying up from the track, bowed the sunflower caps with their burden of seeds almost to the ground. It tore at Natalya's dishevelled hair, dried her wet face, and wound the edge of her grey workaday skirt around her legs.

Ilyinichna stood for several seconds staring at her daughter-in-law in superstitious horror. Against the background of the black thundercloud which had climbed to the zenith Natalya seemed a strange and terrible creature.

The rain came upon them impetuously. The calm before the thunder-storm lasted only a moment. Drooping obliquely, a sparrow-hawk began to cry anxiously, a suslik whistled close to its burrow, the violent wind threw a fine sandy dust into Ilyinichna's face and went howling over the steppe. The old woman struggled

to her feet. Her face was deathly pale as, through the roar of the approaching storm, she shouted:

"What are you saying? God help you! Whose death are you calling for?"

"Lord, punish him! Punish him, Lord!" Natalya screamed, fixing her frenzied eyes on the majestically and wildly gathering clouds, piled into masses by the wind, lit up by blinding flashes of lightning.

The thunder broke with a dry crash over the steppe. Beside herself with fear, Ilyinichna made the sign of the cross, went with uncertain steps to Natalya, and seized her shoulder.

"Go down on your knees! Do you hear, Natalya?"

Natalya looked at her mother-in-law with unseeing eyes and helplessly sank to her knees.

"Ask God for His forgiveness!" Ilyinichna ordered sternly. "Ask Him not to accept your prayer. Whose death are you asking for? The father of your own children? Oh, it's a mortal sin.... Cross yourself! Bow down to the earth! Say: 'Lord, forgive me my wickedness, sinful that I am.'"

Natalya crossed herself, whispered something with white lips, and, clenching her teeth, rolled awkwardly on her side.

Washed by the downpour, the steppe turned wonderfully green. A brilliant arching rainbow was flung from the distant pond right to the Don. In the west the thunder was still rumbling hollowly. Muddy hill water was pouring and gurgling along the runnels. Foaming rills streamed down to the Don over the slope, over the melon plots, carrying with them leaves torn away by the rain, grass washed by its roots out of the soil, broken ears of rye. A rich, sandy silt crawled over the melon plots, piling against the melon and water-melon tendrils. Along the summer tracks flowed the rejoicing water, washing out deep ruts. A stack of hay, set on fire by lightning, was burning out on a spur of a distant ravine. And the lilac column of smoke rose high, almost touching the crest of the rainbow arching over the horizon.

Setting their bare feet cautiously on the dirty, slippery road and lifting their skirts high, Ilyinichna and Natalya made their way down to the village. As they went, Ilyinichna said:

"You're terribly touchy, you youngsters, God's truth! The least thing and you go into a frenzy. If you'd lived as I had to live when I was young, then what would you have done? All his life Grisha hasn't raised a finger against you, and still you're not satisfied, but you must go and carry on like that. You want to throw him over, and you go off into a fit, and I don't know what you didn't do. You even brought God into your dirty business.... Well, tell me, you poor thing, is that good? But when I was young my game-legged idol used to thrash me almost to death, and that all for nothing, all over nothing. I hadn't done the least thing to deserve it. He himself behaved abominably, but he worked his temper off on me. He used to come home at dawn, and I would scream and cry and fling reproaches at him, and he would give his fist its sweet will.... For a month I'd go about as blue as iron all over, and yet I lived through it and brought up the children, and not once did I try to clear out. I'm not going to praise Grisha, but you can at least live with a man like that. If it hadn't been for that snake he'd have made as good a husband as you could wish for. She's bewitched him, to be sure."

Natalya walked along for some time silently turning over something in her mind, then said: "I don't want to talk about it any more, Mother. When Grigory comes back, then we'll see what I'm to do. Maybe I'll clear out of my own choice, or maybe he'll turn me out. But for the present I shan't leave your house to go anywhere else."

"Now, you should have said that long ago!" Ilyinichna rejoiced. "God grant everything will work out for the best. He wouldn't turn you out for anything, and you're not to think of it! He loves both you and the children so much, do you think he'd ever hear of it? Never! He won't forsake you for Aksinya; he can't do that! And there are quarrels even in the

best of families! So long as he comes back alive...."

"I don't want him to die. I said that in my temper. Don't throw that up in my face.... I can't turn him out of my heart, but all the same, life is hard enough."

"My dear, my own one! Do you think I don't know? Only you never ought to do anything in a rush. You're right, let's drop all the talk about it. And for the Lord's sake don't say anything to the old man about it. It's nothing to do with him."

"There's one thing I must tell you.... It isn't clear at the moment whether I'll be living with Grigory or not. But I don't want to have any more children by him. Even with the two I've got it's not certain where I may have to go.... But I'm already carrying another, Mother...."

"Since when?"

"I'm in my third month."

"But how can you get away from that? You've got to bear the child whether you want to or not."

"I won't!" Natalya said resolutely. "I'm going this very day to see old Kapitonovna. She'll rid me of it.... She's done it for other women."

"What, you'll kill the seed? And you can talk like that, you shameless hussy?" The indignant Ilyinichna halted in the middle of the road and clapped her hands. She was about to say something more, but behind them there was a rattle of wheels, the sucking noise of horse-hoofs in the mud, and someone's shout to his horse.

Ilyinichna and Natalya stepped off the road, letting their tucked-up skirts down as they went. Old Beskhlebnov was driving back from the fields, and as he drew level with them he reined in his spirited little mare.

"Climb in, women, and I'll take you home; you don't want to knead the mud for nothing."

"Thank you, Agevich; we're tired out with slipping about," Ilyinichna said contentedly; she was the first to seat herself in the capacious wagon.

After dinner Ilyinichna wanted to have a talk with Natalya, to explain to her that there was no reason why she should free herself of her pregnancy. As she

washed up the dishes she thought over the arguments which seemed to her to carry the most conviction, and even considered telling Pantelei of Natalya's decision and calling in his aid to dissuade their grief-crazed daughter-in-law from her unwise step. But while she was dealing with domestic matters Natalya quietly got herself ready and left the house.

"Where's Natalya?" Ilyinichna asked Dunya a little later.

"She made up a bundle and went out."

"Where to? What did she say? What sort of bundle?"

"Why, how should I know, Mother? She put a clean skirt and something else into a kerchief and went out without saying a word."

"Unhappy child!" To Dunya's amazement, Ilyinichna helplessly burst into tears and sat down on the bench.

"What's the matter, Mother? God help you, what are you crying for?"

"Mind your own business, you pest! It's nothing to do with you! But what did she say? And why didn't you tell me when she was getting ready?"

In a vexed tone Dunya answered:

"Oh, you're terrible! Why, how was I to know I'd got to tell you? She hasn't gone for good, has she? She must have gone off to see her mother, and what you're crying for I haven't the least idea."

Ilyinichna waited with the greatest anxiety for Natalya's return. Fearing her husband's reproaches and censure, she decided to say nothing to him about it.

At sunset the herd returned from the steppe. The short summer twilight descended. Lights glowed here and there in the village, but Natalya was still missing. The Melekhov family sat down to supper. Pale with agitation, Ilyinichna served up the home-made noodles with onion fried in vegetable oil. The old man picked up his spoon, gathered crumbs of stale bread in it, poured them into his bearded mouth, and, abstractedly looking around at the others seated at the table, asked:

"Where's Natalya? Why don't you call her to the table?"

"She's out," Ilyinichna replied in a low tone.

"Out where?"

"She must have gone to see her mother and decided to stay."

"She's staying a long time. She's old enough to know better...." Pantelei muttered discontentedly.

As always, he ate diligently, zealously; occasionally he laid his spoon down bottom upward on the table, took a sidelong, approving glance at Mishatka, who was sitting beside him, and said roughly: "Turn round a bit, my boy; let me wipe your lips. Your mother's a wanderer, and there's no one to look after you...." He wiped his grandson's tender, rosy little lips with his large, black, horny palm.

They ate their meal in silence and rose from the table. Pantelei gave the order:

"Put out the light. We haven't got much oil, and there's no point in wasting it."

"Shall I bolt the door?" Ilyinichna asked.

"Yes."

"But how about Natalya?"

"If she turns up, she'll knock. Maybe she'll go roaming till morning. A fine way of carrying on! You'd better let her have more of her own way, you old hag! Taking it into her head to go visiting at night.... I'll tell her so in the morning. She's following Darya's lead...."

Ilyinichna lay down without undressing. For half an hour she lay sighing and turning over quietly. She was about to get up and go to see Kapitonovna when she heard uncertain, shuffling steps under the window. She jumped up with an agility not common in one of her years, hurriedly ran out into the passage, and opened the door.

Natalya, as pale as death, clutching at the hand-rail, slowly came up the steps. The full moon brilliantly lit up her sunken face, her hollow eyes, her painfully knitted brows. As she walked she trembled like a stricken animal, and wherever she set her feet she left a dark blood-stain.

Ilyinichna silently put her arms around her and

led her into the porch. Natalya leaned her back against the door and hoarsely whispered:

"Is everybody asleep? Mother, wipe up the blood behind me.... Look, I've left traces...."

"What have you done to yourself?" Ilyinichna whispered, choking back her sobs.

Natalya tried to smile, but a miserable grimace distorted her face.

"Don't start crying, Mother, or you'll wake the others up.... Well, I've rid myself.... Now I've got a quiet heart.... Only there's a lot of blood. It's pouring out of me as if I'd been cut open.... Give me your hand, Mother. My head's swimming."

Ilyinichna bolted the door; then, as though she were in a strange house, she groped a long time with a trembling hand and could not find the handle to the inner door in the darkness. Walking on tiptoe, she led Natalya into the large best room. She woke up Dunya and sent her out, called Darya, and lit the lamp.

The door leading to the kitchen was open, and through it came Pantelei's loud measured snoring. Little Polyushka was sweetly smacking her lips and muttering something in her sleep. Deep is a child's untroubled, restful sleep!

While Ilyinichna was puffing up the pillow and getting the bed ready, Natalya sat down on a bench and weakly laid her head on the edge of the table. Dunya wanted to come into the room, but Ilyinichna harshly told her:

"Go away, you shameless hussy, and don't show yourself here! It's nothing for you to poke your nose into!"

Scowling, Darya took a wet rag and went into the porch. Natalya painfully raised her head and said:

"Take the clean bedding off the bed.... Spread a piece of sacking for me.... I'm sure to soil it...."

"Hold your tongue!" Ilyinichna ordered. "Undress and lie down! Do you feel bad? Shall I bring you some water?"

"I'm feeling terribly weak.... Bring me a clean shift and water...."

With an effort Natalya rose and went with uncertain steps to the bed. Only then did Ilyinichna notice that her skirt was soaked with blood and hanging heavily around her, clinging to her legs. She stared with horror as Natalya bent down and wrung out the edge of the skirt as though she had been out in the rain, then began to undress.

"But you're bleeding to death!" Ilyinichna sobbed out.

Natalya undressed and closed her eyes, breathing spasmodically and quickly. The old woman took one glance at her; then, with a resolute air, marched into the kitchen. After a struggle she managed to arouse Pantelei and said:

"Natalya's ill.... She's very bad, she may be dying.... Harness up the horse at once and drive to Vyeshenskaya for the doctor."

"A devilish fine thing! What's happened to her? What's she ill with? She'd do better not to go roving at night...."

The old woman briefly explained what had happened. Pantelei jumped out of bed in a frenzy and, buttoning up his trousers as he went, strode towards the best room.

"Ah, you filthy hussy! Ah, you daughter of a bitch! What have you been up to, eh? Necessity forced her to it! Well, I'll teach her...."

"Are you mad, damn you? Where are you going? Don't go in there, she doesn't want you.... You'll wake the children up. Go out to the yard and harness the horse quickly!" Ilyinichna tried to stop the old man. But, paying no attention to her, he went to the door of the best room and kicked it open.

"You've done a fine thing, you daughter of the devil!" he roared, halting on the threshold.

"You mustn't! Father, don't come in, for Christ's sake don't come in!" Natalya screamed piercingly. She had taken off her shift, and she pressed it to her breast.

Swearing violently, Pantelei looked for his coat and cap, then the harness. He was so long over it that Dunya could not control herself. She burst into the kitchen and fell on her father, while the tears started

to her eyes:

"Drive off at once! What are you rummaging about like a beetle in dung for? Natalya's dying, and he takes a whole hour to get ready! And he calls himself a father! If you don't want to go, why don't you say so? I'll harness up the horse myself and drive to Vyeshenskaya!"

"You're daft! What are you flying off about? Who's going to take orders from you, you sticky scab? Here's another of them shouting at her father, the slut!" Pantelei wrapped his coat round him defiantly and, muttering curses under his breath, went out into the yard.

After his departure everybody in the house felt less constrained. Darya washed the floor, ruthlessly shifting chairs and benches. Ilyinichna allowed Dunya into the best room, and the girl sat at Natalya's head, smoothing the pillow, giving her water. Ilyinichna occasionally stole in to the children sleeping in the side room; then, returning to the best room, she gazed at Natalya, resting her cheek on her palm, shaking her head bitterly.

Natalya lay silent; her head with its tangled skeins of dank, sweat-soaked hair rolled about the pillow. Every half-hour Ilyinichna gently lifted her, drew away the saturated bedding, and spread clean linen.

With every hour Natalya grew weaker. Some time after midnight she opened her eyes and asked:

"Will it begin to get light soon?"

"No sign as yet," the old woman soothed her, thinking to herself: "That means she isn't going to come through. She's afraid of going without seeing the children...."

As though to confirm her guess, Natalya quietly said: "Mother, wake up Mishatka and Polyushka...."

"What for, my dear? What do you want to disturb them in the middle of the night for? They'll be terrified if they see you, and they'll start crying.... Why wake them up?"

"I'd like to see them.... I'm feeling bad."

"God have mercy.... What are you saying? In a

minute Father will be bringing the doctor, and he'll help you. You ought to try to get some sleep, my dear, don't you think?"

"What sleep can I get?" Natalya answered with a hint of annoyance in her tone. After that she said no more for some time, and her breathing grew more regular.

Ilyinichna quietly stole out on to the steps and gave way to her tears. She returned with a red and swollen face to the room when the dawn was beginning to show a faint glimmer in the east. As the door creaked, Natalya opened her eyes and asked again:

"Will it be getting light soon?"

"It's dawning now."

"Cover my feet with a sheepskin."

Dunya threw a sheepskin over her feet and tucked in the warm blanket at the sides. Natalya thanked her with a look, then called Ilyinichna closer and said:

"Sit down by me, Mother, and you, Dunya and Darya, go out for a while. I want to talk to Mother alone.... Have they gone?" she asked, without opening her eyes.

"Yes."

"Father hasn't come back yet?"

"He'll be back soon. Are you feeling worse, then?"

"No; it doesn't matter.... This is what I wanted to say. Mother, I'm going to die soon. I can feel it in my heart. I've lost so much blood, it's terrible! Tell Darya when she lights the stove to put on plenty of water.... You wash me yourselves; I don't want strange...."

"Natalya! Cross yourself, darling! What are you talking about death for? God is merciful; you'll get better."

With a feeble gesture Natalya asked her mother-in-law to be silent and said:

"Don't interrupt me. It's hard enough for me to talk as it is, and I want to say—My head's swimming again. Have I told you about the water? But I must be strong.... Kapitonovna did it quite early, as soon as I got there after dinner.... She was terrified at what

happened, poor woman. I lost a terrible lot of blood.... If only I can live till morning.... Put on a lot of water. I want to be clean when I die.... Mother, dress me in my green skirt, the one with the embroidery around the edges. Grisha liked me in that one.... And my poplin jacket—it's in the chest at the top, in the right-hand corner, just under a shawl.... And when I die, you can send the children to my people.... You might send for Mother; let her come at once.... I must say good-bye to her. Get the sheet from under me. It's all wet...."

Raising Natalya with one arm under her back, Ilyinichna drew away the sheet and somehow managed to tuck another under her. With an effort Natalya whispered:

"Turn me over—on my side." And she lost consciousness.

The dove-grey dawn peered in at the window. Dunya washed a bucket and went out into the yard to milk the cows. Ilyinichna threw the window wide open and the best room, heavy with the scent of fresh blood and the smell of burned paraffin, was freshened with the sharp, invigorating chill of the summer morning. The wind swept the tear-drops of dew off the cherry leaves lying on the outside window-ledge; the early voices of birds, the lowing of cows, and the occasional heavy cracking of the cowherd's whip came through the window.

Natalya opened her eyes, licked her dry, bloodless, yellow lips with the tip of her tongue, and asked for a drink. She no longer asked after the children or her mother. Everything was slipping away from her, and slipping away for ever.

Ilyinichna closed the window and went across to the bed. How terribly Natalya had changed during this one night! The previous day she had been like a young apple-tree in blossom—beautiful, healthy, strong; but now her cheeks were whiter than chalk from the Don-side hills, her nose was peaked, her lips had lost their recent brilliant freshness, had grown thinner, and seemed to be shrinking back from her parted teeth. Only her eyes retained their former glitter, but their

expression had changed. They had a new, strange, alarming look as from time to time, submitting to some inexplicable necessity, she raised her bluish lids and peered around the room, then rested her glance on Ilyinichna for a second.

Pantelei returned at sunrise. The heavy-eyed doctor, weary with sleepless nights and endless bother with typhus and wounded cases, stretched himself and climbed out of the tarantass, took a bundle from the seat, and went into the house. On the steps he removed his canvas rain-coat, and leaning over the hand-rail, spent a long time washing his hairy hands, looking up under his eyebrows at Dunya as she poured water from a jug into his palms, and even winking at her. Then he went into the best room and spent a good ten minutes with Natalya, first sending out everybody else.

Pantelei and Ilyinichna sat down in the kitchen.

"Well, how is she?" the old man asked in a whisper as soon as they left the best room.

"Bad. . . ."

"Did she do it of her own will?"

"It was her own idea," Ilyinichna evaded the question.

"Hot water, quick!" the doctor ordered, thrusting his tousled head round the door.

While the water was being heated he came into the kitchen. At the old man's mute question he waved his hand hopelessly:

"She'll be gone by dinner-time. She's lost a terrible quantity of blood. There's nothing to be done! Have you sent word to Grigory Panteleyevich?"

Without answering, Pantelei hurriedly limped out into the porch. Darya saw the old man go under the eaves of the shed to the mowing machine, lean his head against a pile of old dung-fuel bricks, and weep aloud.

The doctor remained another half-hour and sat a little while on the steps, dozing under the rays of the rising sun. When the samovar began to boil he went back into the best room, gave Natalya a camphor injection, then came out and asked for some milk. Stifling a yawn, he drank two glasses of milk and said:

"Take me back at once. I've got sick and wounded waiting at Vyeshenskaya, and there's nothing I can do here. It's quite hopeless. I'd do anything I could for Grigory Panteleyevich, but I tell you frankly I can do nothing. There's little enough we can do at the best of times: we can only heal the sick; we haven't yet learned how to resurrect the dead. And your little woman has been so badly cut about that she's got nothing left to live with.... The womb's torn terribly, there's nothing of it left. I expect the old woman used an iron hook. It's our ignorance; you can't ever get away from it!"

Pantelei threw hay into the tarantass and told Darya:

"You drive him back. Don't forget to water the mare when you drop down to the Don."

He was about to offer the doctor money, but the man flatly refused it.

"You ought to be ashamed even to speak of it, Pantelei Prokofyevich! My own people, and you're offering me money! No, don't come near me with it. How can you repay me? You needn't ask. If I could put your daughter-in-law on her feet it would be a different matter."

About six o'clock in the morning Natalya felt considerably better. She asked for a wash, combed her hair before a mirror which Dunya held for her, and, looking around at her dear ones, her eyes glittering, she forced a smile.

"Well, now I'm on the mend! But I was really frightened! I thought I was done for.... But why are the children sleeping so late? Dunya, go and see if they're awake yet."

Her mother, Lukinichna, arrived with her younger sister, Agrippina. The old woman burst into tears when she saw her daughter, but Natalya said again and again in an agitated tone: "What are you crying for, Mother? I'm not so bad now.... you haven't come to bury me, have you? Oh, do tell me, what are you crying for?"

Agrippina gave her mother a nudge and, guessing the reason, Lukinichna swiftly wiped her eyes and said

in a soothing tone: "Why, what are you thinking, child? I was crying just because I've such a stupid head. My heart ached as I looked at you. You've changed so much...."

A faint flush glowed in Natalya's cheeks when she heard Mishatka's voice and Polyushka's laugh.

"Bring them in here! Call them quick!" she asked. "They can dress after."

Polyushka came in first and halted at the door, rubbing her sleepy eyes with her little fist.

"Your mummy's fallen ill," Natalya said with a smile. "Come over to me, my treasure!"

Polyushka looked in surprise at the grown-ups sitting gravely on the benches and, going over to her mother, said in a vexed tone: "Why didn't you wake me up? And what have they all come for?"

"They've come to see me.... But why should I have woken you up?"

"I'd have brought you some water and sat with you...."

"Well, go and wash, comb your hair and say your prayers, and then you can come and sit with me...."

"But will you be getting up for breakfast?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Well, then I'll bring your breakfast in here. Would you like that, Mummy?"

"She's the very image of her father; only her heart's not like his, hers is softer...." Natalya said with a feeble smile, letting her head fall back and pulling the blanket around her legs as though she were cold.

An hour later she took a turn for the worse. She beckoned the children to her, embraced them, made the sign of the cross over them, kissed them, and asked her mother to take them to her. Lukinichna entrusted the children to Agrippina and remained with her daughter.

Natalya closed her eyes and said, as though delirious:

"So I shan't see him after all...." Then, as though she had remembered something, she sharply raised herself on the bed and asked: "Bring Mishatka back."

The tear-stained Agrippina pushed the boy into the room and remained, quietly moaning, in the kitchen.

Sullen, with the Melekhovs' ungracious look, Mishatka timidly came towards the bed. The sharp change which had occurred in his mother's face made her almost a stranger, unrecognizable. Natalya drew her son towards her and felt his little heart pounding, like that of a trapped sparrow.

"Bend down to me, little son! Closer!" she asked.

She whispered something into his ear, then pushed him away, questioningly gazed into his eyes, compressed her quivering lips, and, forcing a miserable, tormented smile, said: "You won't forget? You'll tell him?"

"I shan't forget." Mishatka clutched his mother's forefinger, squeezed it in his hot little fist, held it tightly for a second, then let it go. As he stepped away from the bed, for some reason he walked on tiptoe, balancing himself with his arms.

Natalya watched him to the door, then silently turned to the wall.

She died at noon.

The telegram had been wandering in search of Grigory through all the districts of the Khoper Region, and it arrived too late. He reached home on the third day after Natalya was buried. He dismounted at the wicket-gate. Dunya ran out of the house and burst into sobs. He embraced her hurriedly and said, knitting his brows: "Give the horse a good long walk.... Now, don't bellow!" Turning to Prokhor, he ordered: "Ride home! If you're wanted I'll let you know."

Holding Mishatka and Polyushka by the hands, Ilyinichna came out to the steps to welcome her son.

Grigory snatched up the children in his arms and said in a quivering voice: "Now, don't cry! Now, no tears! My darlings! So you're left motherless? Now, now.... Your mummy's left us in the lurch...."

But he himself had difficulty in choking back his sobs as he went into the house and greeted his father.

"We couldn't save her—" Pantelei said, and at once limped off into the passage.

Ilyinichna led Grigory into the best room and told

him about Natalya. The old woman did not want to tell all the truth, but Grigory asked:

"Why did she take it into her head not to have the child? Do you know?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well?"

"She had called on your—that... the day before. And Aksinya told her everything."

"Aha! So that's it!" Grigory flushed heavily, and his eyes dropped.

Grigory suffered not only because in his own way he had loved Natalya and had grown used to her during the six years they had lived together, but also because he felt responsible for her death. If Natalya had acted on her threat to take the children and go to live with her mother, if she had died there, hating her faithless husband and unreconciled with him, Grigory might not have felt the burden of his loss so deeply, and doubtless he would not have been so painfully racked with remorse. But his mother told him Natalya had forgiven him everything, and that she had loved him and spoken of him until her last moment. And the knowledge added to his suffering, burdened his conscience with incessant reproach, forced him to see the past years and all his conduct in a new light.

During the fortnight he spent in Tatarsky, Grigory saw Aksinya only three times, and then he had only glimpses of her. With her native sense and tact she avoided a meeting, realizing that it would be better for her not to come within his sight. Woman-like she realized his mood, realized that any incautious and untimely demonstration of her feelings for him might set him against her and throw a cloud over their relations. She waited for Grigory to speak to her himself. The moment came a day before his departure for the front. He was driving back late from the fields with a wagon-load of grain, and in the dusk he met Aksinya by the lane nearest to the steppe. She bowed when still some distance away and faintly smiled. Her

smile was challenging and expectant. He answered her bow, but could not pass her by in silence.

"How are you getting on?" he asked, imperceptibly pulling on the reins, slowing the horses down from their fast walking pace.

"Quite well, thank you, Grigory Panteleyevich."

"How is it we haven't seen anything of you?"

"I've been out in the fields. I've a lot to do single-handed."

Mishatka was sitting with Grigory in the wagon. Possibly for that reason Grigory did not halt the horses and did not stop for further conversation. He had driven on several paces when, hearing a call, he turned. Aksinya was standing by the fence.

"Are you staying long in the village?" she asked, agitatedly plucking the petals of a daisy.

"I'm off any day now."

By the way she hesitated for a second, it was evident that she wanted to ask something more. For some reason she did not, but waved her hand and hurriedly walked on to the common-land, not once looking back.

